

## Unearthing the SoTL in Self and Practice

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### Unearthing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Self and Practice

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#### Abstract

Bringing the principles and characteristics of the scholarship of teaching and learning into my university classroom has helped me support the development of teaching as scholarly activity for my students while cementing my own commitment in this regard. These students are preservice teachers, who have the opportunity to conduct peer observations and provide feedback to one another establishing a learning commons of sort. While engaged in an initial practicum experience, preservice elementary teachers observe and provide feedback on each other's teaching. This paper will describe and analyze this peer observation and feedback activity as part of the cycle of the scholarship of teaching and learning. My engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning has also stimulated further research in this area among my peers. Establishing praxis in the scholarship of teaching and learning is beneficial at all levels of teaching and learning.

#### Reflections on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

I began my career in higher education with compartmentalized and isolated conceptions of teaching, service and scholarship. I saw them as competing forces vying for my time. Between demanding teaching loads with field supervision and multiple service commitments, time for scholarship seemed rather elusive. Although I managed to carve out some time for scholarship, within the context of that initial compartmentalized framework, my scholarship was unrelated to my teaching practice. Recently, however, I have begun to see aspects of my work in a refreshingly holistic light. I have embraced a growing global, yet often localized, movement known as the scholarship of teaching and learning (Huber and Morreale, 2002). Rooted in inquiry and engagement the scholarship of teaching and learning reconceptualizes teaching as an ongoing and scholarly process as opposed to isolated activities and involves processes such as questioning, designing, investigating, analyzing that are commonly called research (Bass, 1999 and Bender and Gray, 1999). The scholarship of teaching and learning is distinguished from other endeavors by 4 main characteristics. First, it treats teaching "as a form of inquiry into student learning" (Huber and Morreale, 2002, p. 9). Second, it views teaching as public and community oriented, not as private practice (Huber and Hutchings, 2005). Third, in order to qualify as scholarship the work should be subject to review and evaluation, and last, it should be accessible to others in one's field (Bass, 1999).

Two framing principles provide structure for work done in the context of the scholarship of teaching and learning: the research should be responsive to the contemporary educational landscape and responsible for the moral implications of teaching and learning. The work should be necessitated by and responsive to

changing demographics, content, technologies, national priorities, accountability, etc. (Huber and Hutchings, 2005 and Huber and Morreale, 2002). Lee Shulman (2002), former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, notes that the scholarship of teaching carries a moral dimension or “pedagogical imperative” in that “an educator can teach with integrity only if an effort is made to examine the impact of his or her work on students” (Shulman, 2002, p. vii). As such, educators are viewed as stewards of their field and are responsible for maintaining the integrity of the field (Shulman, 2002).

Two understandings from my own teaching background have led me to embrace the scholarship of teaching and learning as an emerging and integral part of my own practice. The ideas about the role of inquiry shaping teaching (Huber and Morreale, 2002) fits well into what I have understood and used in my own teaching as “praxis” (hooks, 1994 and Freire 1970/1998). Praxis involves critical reflection and contemplation on one’s actions and using the reflections to inform practice. Thus, although I have not always situated myself or made the connection across scholarship and teaching in the explicit kinds of ways suggested by the scholarship of teaching, I have always seen myself as one who values and uses praxis. Next, the notion of the teaching learning commons, a space, virtual or other, for initiative, and exchange of ideas in teaching and learning (Huber and Hutchings, 2005), ties into what I have understood and taught as a community of learners. Understanding the teaching learning setting as a community of learners in which learners support and respect each other and teachers nurture and model the same has been a key component of my classes (Bredenkamp and Copple, 1997). My valuing of praxis and community of learners coupled with my appreciation of localized grassroots movements (even if connected to larger movements) have made me welcome the movement for the scholarship of teaching and learning as described and eager to share experiences that fall within its realm.

Reflecting on the scholarship of teaching and learning finds me unearthing things that I had previously kept as part of my “private practice” (true to my compartmentalized view) that could easily fit into the arena of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Bringing the principles and characteristics of the scholarship of teaching and learning into my university classroom has helped me support the development of teaching as scholarly activity for my students. These students are also preservice teachers, who have the opportunity to conduct peer observations and provide feedback to one another establishing a learning commons. While engaged in an initial practicum experience, preservice elementary teachers observe and provide feedback on each other’s teaching. This activity in my university classroom fits the criteria established by Bender and Gray (1999) that characterizes the scholarship of teaching as “thinking hard and consecutively about frameworks we have constructed and how we move within them. As scholars of our teaching we must attend unremittingly to the responses of our students. We must use what we learn about their learning as data to justify or require us to change our practices, and we must make what we learn about our teaching one of the essential topics of conversation within our disciplines” (p. 3). This paper will describe and analyze this peer observation and feedback activity as part of the cycle of the scholarship of teaching and learning.

### Sketching the Background

This emerging study in peer observation and feedback is an outgrowth of my work with preservice teachers as they participate in their initial sustained practicum experience in public elementary schools. Candidly, the peer observation and feedback began as a way to get preservice teachers engaged as their peers taught, particularly whole group lessons. Quickly, however, I began to see far-ranging benefits to preservice teachers as they became engaged in a community of learners engaging in research and reflection about their own teaching and the teaching of their peers. In a broader sense, this study attempts to bridge the gap between highly structured and unstructured peer observation and feedback. In this particular field experience 2-3 preservice teachers are placed in a primary grade classroom. While the preservice teachers collaborate in some areas, they are required to teach individual lessons as well. Although the preservice teachers have always been encouraged to observe and learn from each other, what I actually observed, prior to establishing the peer observation and feedback assignment, was troubling. As their peers taught, the remaining preservice teachers were largely disengaged. They twiddled their thumbs, played with gadgets or stared out the window. One semester, I shared this information with students and encouraged them to observe and provide (written and oral) informal feedback to each other. I semi-formalized this process by providing class time for students to talk in small groups about their observations. I used this time to encourage students to think about how they could better support and utilize each other in general. At the end of this semester, I asked the students to anonymously jot down thoughts on the experience to share with me.

I was pleasantly surprised when all twelve of my practicum students, regardless of personality or final grade reflected on this experience as positive and beneficial. One student succinctly commented, "I learned a lot about what did and didn't work in the classroom by watching my classmates teach." While another elaborated,

. . . . I saw a change in our peer group when we began to ask help of each other to work the centers for lesson plan. Up to that point, we were all three very independent people. I must admit, it is challenging to rely on help from others because of fear of being left standing alone. (So I understand the tendency to be independent). When you strongly suggested that we integrate centers into lesson 4, it forced us to step outside of our confront zone and ask / even rely on the help from our peers. I was the first to teach centers. The ladies did a great job helping me. It seemed to "break the ice" making it easier for us to exchange comments on each other's lessons both compliments and suggestions for improvement. We began to develop that professional unity that I have observed between the teachers at the school (working together for a common good). I just wanted you to know that I believe the combination of the two (helping each other with centers and observing our peers) was greatly beneficial to the Methods I students. . . .

From the comments of my students, I learned that students can benefit from a semi-formal process of peer observation and feedback. I also saw that grounding preservice teachers' practice in the scholarship of teaching and learning helped them articulate more clearly the best practices of teaching. From this semester on, my own practicum students have all engaged in providing assistance and informal

feedback to each other as part of a community of learners engaging scholarly practices of teaching. As part of my own scholarship of teaching, I used these early experiences to design a simple semi-structured study on preservice teachers' perceptions of peer observation and feedback to improve upon my praxis and enhance this opportunity for preservice teachers.

### **Significance**

As educators across levels look for multiple and authentic ways to assess and support student learning, self and peer assessment have become an integral part of many teaching learning settings (Topping, 1998). Faculty in teacher education programs have been teaching preservice teachers about the value and benefits of peer assessment for certainly over two decades, although they have lagged behind P-12 counterparts in implementing self and peer assessments. However, some higher education faculty have included self-assessment and peer assessment components in their courses and some educational programs have made these cornerstones of their programs (Anderson, Barksdale, and Hite, 2005; Anderson and Radencich, 2001; Bowman and McCormick, 2000; and Wynn and Kromey, 1999). Peer assessment brings a rich practical dimension to the preparation of preservice teacher (Topping, 1998; Zevenberger, 2001). This study works to bridge the gap between highly structured and unstructured peer observation and feedback. Thus, targeted areas in the preservice teachers' actual teaching were observed and assessed as opposed to only global feedback or specific evaluative feedback using formal indicators or rating scales. At the same time feedback to peers was provided in narrative form with which the preservice teachers felt more comfortable rather than a more formal measure such as the performance rubric used by the university supervisors in assessing the students' performance. While university supervisors' assessments are often more evaluative in nature, peer feedback is perceived as more supportive or developmental. For these reasons, this research stands poised to reopen dialogue on the role and effectiveness of peer observation and feedback in preservice teacher development. Grounding these observations in research through utilizing the principles and characteristics of the scholarship of teaching and learning goes far in pushing this feedback away from simple pat-on-the-back responses and toward more reflective responses moving preservice teachers toward commonly accepted best practices.

### **Surveying the Literature**

A review of literature on peer evaluation with preservice teachers generated evidence of some use of peer observation and feedback in preservice teacher preparation programs. A comprehensive and definitive article by Keith Topping (1998) summarizes and reviews different research from 1969 to 1998, types of peer assessment, theoretical underpinnings and advantages and disadvantages. Findings of the Topping article are complemented by Robyn Zevenbergen (2001). Topping contends that peer assessment benefits both the assessor and the assessed. "The assessor engages in activities, such as identifying errors in knowledge, which are all cognitively demanding activities that could help consolidate, reinforce, and deepen understanding in the assessor" (p.254). For the assessed (as well as the assessor)

feedback can lead to higher quality work. This is especially true when the criteria for the assessment and samples of desirable and undesirable work have been made clear to all involved. General benefits of peer assessment include faster feedback in larger quantity, more effective learning, increased time on task, reduction in cumulative errors increased levels of engagement, accountability and responsibility (Topping, 1998; Zevenberger, 2001). Further, peer assessment can help promote teamwork and communication skills as well as provide insight into how institutions assess students.

More recent research on peer observation specific to teacher education refers to the concept of "peer coaching," which generally refers to practice in which pairs of preservice or inservice teachers are placed in the same classroom with some degree of interaction, collaboration, and observation and feedback on each other's teaching being carried out (Anderson, Barksdale, and Hite, 2005; Anderson and Radencich, 2001; Bowman and McCormick, 2000; and Wynn and Kromey, 1999). Peers support each other in their teaching in general and specific aspects of teaching. Peer coaching ranges from unstructured observation and feedback to highly structured and time intensive interactions on the participants. Often this degree of engagement depends on the duration and complexity of the field experience. Participation ranges from unguided observation and feedback, in which participants respond to general teaching or basic indicators such as strengths and weaknesses, to including some or all of the following elements: attending training sessions; participating in pre and post conferences tied to each observation, completing data forms which document target areas; keeping reflective journals or dialogue journals; using audio and videotapes in review of lessons and in recording conferences, participating in weekly debriefing sessions, offering written responses to feedback from peer coaches; rating each other using specific instruments with several indicators; and completing pre and post surveys, including written comments, of peer coaching (Anderson, Barksdale, and Hite, 2005; Anderson and Radencich, 2001; Bowman and McCormick, 2000; and Wynn and Kromey, 1999). The most time intensive and highly structured peer coaching experiences were conducted with student teachers in the final semester or students in their final year of teacher preparation. At this level the peer coaching experience is often interwoven in a structured multiprong system, including the classroom teacher and the university supervisor. Participants often reflect and rate peer coaching as part of the overall field experience. In most cases the peer coaching seems to be integrated throughout a program.

Each of the general type of peer coaching/observation, guided and unguided, has advantages and disadvantages. For example guided observations allow preservice teachers to target a specific area on which to focus. However, this may facilitate tunnel vision and keep preservice teachers from seeing the lesson in its broader context. On the other hand, unguided observations could lead to surface understanding of bits and pieces of lesson without any conceptual depth regarding specific aspects of teaching (Anderson, Barksdale, and Hite, 2005). Having reviewed the literature on both structured/guided and unstructured/unguided observations, Anderson, Barksdale, and Hite (2005) concluded that both guided and unguided observations are beneficial to preservice teachers.

As in some of the earlier studies highlighted by Topping, preservice teachers rated peer coaching as positive and beneficial to their development. Within and across

studies, advantages of peer coaching include increased professionalism, improved retention, increased effective teaching behavior and corresponding decrease in ineffective behaviors, and improved collegiality (Anderson, Barksdale, and Hite, 2005 and Wynn and Kromrey, 1999).

Challenges to peer assessment/peer coaching include initial anxiety on the part of students, reluctance to give or accept feedback, competitiveness, inability to give feedback. Peer assessment is not to be viewed as a substitute for teacher assessment (Anderson, Barksdale, and Hite, 2005; Anderson and Radencich, 2001; Bowman and McCormick, 2000; Wynn and Kromey, 1999, and Topping, 1998). Topping (1998) notes that "the majority of students (18) suggest that peer assessment is of adequate reliability and validity in a wide range of applications" (p. 258). Some authors note that peer assessment is generally more reliable than self-assessment (Topping, 1998 and Zevenberger, 2001). The studies reviewed found that participants reported feelings of support, increased self-confidence and stress reduction. "The benefits to their teaching included creative brainstorming and fine tuning of lessons, resulting in improved organization, preparation, and delivery of lesson. Potential drawbacks included lack of trust and unbalanced, nonobjective or dishonest feedback" (p. 264). Overall peer assessment/peer coaching can be valuable as part of the overall teacher preparation program.

### **Relating the Process**

In this semi-structured study one hundred and twelve preservice teachers from six different instructors' early primary practicum classes were invited to participate in the study. Forty-five students (40 Caucasian females, 1 white male, and 3 African American females, and 1 Hispanic female) participated in the study. Most of the participants were 19 -25 years old, with one student in her thirties and one a little over 40. The students were engaged in a semester-long field experience in which they observed, assisted and taught in a kindergarten, first or second grade classroom. They attended two days per week for two hours the first half of the semester and five days per week for two hours the second half. Two to three students were placed in a classroom. Their roles involved allowing themselves to be observed and provided with written and oral feedback by peers; observing peers and providing written and oral feedback to them; and completing a brief questionnaire (assessment) of their overall participation in the process. Preservice teachers had to be observed and observe a peer at least once to complete the questionnaire. In an orientation students were briefed on the process and familiarized with the questionnaire. As a part of the practicum (and in previous semesters), preservice teachers learn about characteristics of effective teaching through observations, modeling, and their own teaching. This particular program has a lesson performance rubric that is used to evaluate preservice teachers' teaching. Students are familiar with this rubric and were encouraged to keep its characteristics in mind as they observed each other's lessons. To further focus the preservice teachers in their observations three key areas on which to provide feedback were identified: classroom management, concept development, and use of resources. These areas were clarified through discussion and questions and answers in the initial session. In addition to these areas, preservice teachers would rate the overall experience of giving and receiving feedback and its impact on their self-esteem as well as provide

written comments on the experience. On the questionnaire, six items were rated on a scale of 1-5 (1-no benefit, 2-unsure, 3-fair, 4-good, a 5-great). Except for a reminder to observe each other through e-mail and oral communication from their instructors at midterm, there was no follow up with students regarding peer observation. At the end of the semester, students were reminded through the same channels to anonymously complete and submit the questionnaire describing their experiences with the peer observation and feedback activities.

Each of the forty-five completed questionnaires received were assigned a number from 1-45. The numeric portions were run for basic descriptive statistics using SPSS and the written comments were studied closely.

#### Sharing the Findings

An examination of mean scores and narrative comments showed that overall preservice teachers perceived participation in peer observation and feedback as beneficial. 63% preservice teachers reported that giving feedback was beneficial to a good extent while 30% reported that it was beneficial to a great extent. For the inverse, getting feedback 50% of students reported the benefit was good while 43.5% reported that it was great. The mean score for the degree of benefit of giving feedback ( $m=4.20$ ) and getting feedback ( $m=4.38$ ) supported students' narrative that the experience was beneficial. Below are sample comments from students. One student summarized her thoughts on how observing others helped her this way. I felt it helped me to see things that they were doing good. This helped me to think of things I could do when teaching. When I saw the things they were doing wrong it gave me a chance to analyze what they were doing wrong and what they should do to change that. I could also apply this.

Another student noted,

I enjoyed watching my peers present these lessons. Through my observations, I was able to take mental notes on technologies that were effective and those that were not. I especially zeroed in on the attentiveness of the class. If a child was distracted, I wanted to know why and problem solve for future situations (making sure I kept a close eye on that child when I gave my lesson). I observed things that work well and things that could work better with a few adjust. Fern did a little dance with the students that simulated the life cycle events. It was fun too. I asked her if I could borrow the idea. I wrote it up as a lesson and filed it away in my creative arts lesson book. I appreciated the opportunity to observe others teach. It helps me improve my own skills either through learning from these areas or through implementing their ideas.

Commenting on the feedback they received from peers, three different students wrote,

My peers saw things that I necessarily did not see. For instance they heard my oral language. I didn't even realize I was using incorrect grammar until Sharon and Latasha pointed it out to me. I think peer feedback is very useful

. . . .

I loved it! It was very useful in helping me grow as a teacher. Of course, I loved to hear any positive feedback. And when there were issues that I needed to work on, I took the initiative and made it better the next time that I taught.

I was able to see what others noticed that I need to improve on. Sometimes it takes others to put those things in perspective. It made me improve on these things for the next time. Also, the positive comments improved my self esteem and allowed me to see what others thought about me while I taught.

Overall, preservice teachers felt that observing peers allowed them to see things they “want and did not want to do” in their own teaching. Preservice teachers also felt that getting feedback from peers on their own teaching helped them “feel better” about their own teaching and helped them identify areas that they needed “to improve in.” As one student simply noted, “sometimes others see things you do not realize you are doing. It was good to hear the good with the not so good so it could be fixed. It always helps to bounce ideas off others.”

In addition to the overall rating of giving feedback, preservice teachers rated the benefit of the combination of giving and receiving feedback on their *own* classroom management ( $m=3.87$ ), concept development ( $m=3.18$ ), and the use of resources ( $m=4.33$ ). As the mean scores indicate the greatest benefit was perceived in the area of self-esteem with over 91% of the preservice teachers rating the extent of benefit either good or great in a fifty-fifty split. The next greatest area of benefit as reported by preservice teachers was in the area of classroom management which 82.6% of students reported good to great benefit. On the benefits on the use of resources 63.1% of preservice teachers reported good to great benefit. Preservice reported the lowest benefit in the area of concept development with 56.2% reported good (41.3) to great (13%) benefit. This item had the greatest range in frequency with ratings as follows: No benefit-7, Unsure-9, Fair-4, Good -19, and Great-6. preservice teachers' written comments reflected their high numeric rating of benefit in the area of self-esteem. As one student wrote, “Having my peers in the classroom giving feedback, greatly helped my confidence with students and with the classroom teacher.” However, there were no clues in the written comments as to why concept development was rated as it was. Observations have taught me, though, that concept development/explication of ideas is one of the most challenging areas for beginning preservice teachers.

### **Drawing Conclusions**

This project began simply as a way of getting preservice teachers engaged beyond their own teaching. In short, it was begun to get them to do something other than twiddle their thumbs as their peers taught. However, it has become a valuable teaching and learning tool for preservice teachers. Its findings are supported by research that validates peer feedback as a meaningful form of assessment in the context overall assessment of preservice teachers (Topping, 1998 and Zevenberger, 2001) and peer coaching as a means of improving the quality of preservice teachers' teaching (Anderson, Barksdale, and Hite, 2005). The preservice teachers reported the extent to which they benefited from the overall experience as either good or

great. They also felt that participation in the peer observation experience boosted their self-esteem/self confidence in general. Additionally, they found the feedback to their peers helpful in the areas of classroom management, concept development, and use of resources. Preservice teachers also offered random feedback on other areas such as transition and time management. Feedback was provided on strengths and challenges in the areas identified.

Immediately applicable to the setting in which this study occurs is the need to clarify and present exemplars of good and poor concept development as this was the area rated the lowest. Concept development is an area in which beginning preservice elementary teachers struggle as they are often focused more on activities than outcomes.

Reviewing characteristics of effective teaching, modeling, and discussion of the elements to be observed as well as discussion of the teaching performance assessment rubric used by university supervisors and targeting three areas in which to provide feedback on other aspects of the lesson provided clear purpose for the observations and feedback. Also, as there were mostly three students in each classroom, the preservice teacher under observation received two sets of peer feedback, sometimes in addition to one from the classroom teacher and one from the university supervisor. Thus, with a little bit of triangulating even the most skeptical or resistant to peer feedback preservice teacher should be able to identify commonalities across feedback.

As noted from the initial seminar most preservice teachers did not want to use a rating sheet or any rubric like those used by supervisors and teachers to evaluate their peers. The narrative format allowed preservice teachers to provide feedback in less intimidating terms while offering possible alternatives to areas that they felt needed improvement. One of the additional benefits of the project was that students became closer, shared ideas, and supported each other as a community of learners. They moved from private practice to the commons area valued by the scholarship of teaching and learning. The findings here are supported by the Topping (1998) review of literature on peer assessment and by other such literature including Zevenberger (2001).

A semi-structured approach to peer observation and feedback works well in the absence of program support, for shorter field experiences, experiences in which preservice teachers are already hard pressed for time due to program structure and other factors, and where classroom teachers and university supervisors work with large numbers of students in initial practicum experience. It is important to keep in mind that in initial practicum experiences preservice teachers are still novices themselves, both to the teaching and observation processes. Thus, overburdening them with elaborate instruments to use in observing and assessing each other may be just one more thing for these often nervous beginners to worry about. At the same time, their lack of experience could render them incapable of providing meaningful feedback to their each other. As such, establishing a simple starting framework for their observation is helpful. Preservice teachers could gradually become involved in more elaborate peer coaching techniques as their experience in the classroom increases.

This project, though still in its infancy, provides evidence that engaging preservice teachers in processes of peer observations and feedback yields substantial benefits. Further, grounding this process in the scholarship of learning and teaching establishes teaching as a scholarly activity for preservice teachers. As they embark upon their teaching careers, these teachers will know from experience that they are not engaged in private practice. Rather, they will know that sharing their reflections on their own teaching and the teaching of others is of great benefit to learners as well as teachers.

Perhaps next steps could include formally checking across peer evaluators for interrater reliability as well as comparing peer feedback to the classroom teacher's assessments. Despite the informality of the study, the findings and possibility for future research and applications hold potential to diversify assessment of preservice teachers' teaching and lead to improved quality teaching for participants.

As part of my own engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning, I have written this paper and shared this project with faculty in my department. After sharing this project in my department in a faculty forum, I received comments and feedback from them, which will inform the research as I continue to the next emerging research question. I also found a colleague who is interested in collaborating through further research to explore structured and unstructured peer observation and feedback. Thus, the evidence is ample that establishing praxis in the scholarship of teaching and learning is beneficial at all levels of teaching and learning. Not only have my preservice teachers engaged in teaching as scholarship, but they have also demonstrated this perspective to their host teachers, and have further cemented my own commitments in this regard. In turn, my engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning has stimulated further research in this area among my peers. In this way, the scholarship of teaching and learning supports the development of continually improving the praxis of teaching.

The scholarship of teaching is a recursive and sustained endeavor. Engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning does not necessarily require more or even new work but rather a reconceptualization of what we already do. It is making public our private practices, subjecting them to scrutiny, and continuously questioning and reshaping our practices using insights gleaned from our inquiry and the ideas of others in teaching learning commons, while reflecting changes in society and our ethical commitment to our fields.

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