Fostering reflective practice in middle-level social studies pedagogy.

Winston Vaughan
Xavier University

This article describes various strategies used in a middle level social studies pedagogy class to help preservice teachers develop reflective practice in the teaching and learning process. Preservice teachers enrolled in this course are required to complete course content and a number of field hours in a school setting. In this setting, preservice teachers are assigned to a pre-selected cooperating teacher to observe and model best practices as applied to middle level social studies. Specific strategies are designed for the field experience and course content. Apart from observing and teaching lessons, preservice teachers in the field are required to foster reflective practices in their daily assigned tasks, document the practices of the cooperating teacher, and document observations of the classroom climate. These reflections are recorded in electronic journals and field experience notebooks. In the course work, strong reflective practices are evident in peer teaching and professional development activities. As evidenced in this article, preservice teachers’ evaluations and final class responses tend to favor the use of reflective practices in their daily practice.

The terms inquiry, critical thinking and reflective thinking have been used at one time or another to reflect the process through which individuals find solutions to problems through reflection. The reflective process can be aligned with the Deweyan tradition on education which advocated that educative experience entails reflective thought. For preservice teachers, it is paramount that reflection guides what is done in the teaching process. If teachers are going to be successful at what they do, they must embrace the reflection process on a daily basis. Research suggests that reflection is viewed as an essential teaching practice (Crotty & Allyn, 2001; Dewey, 1933; Parkinson, 2005). According to Petrie (1992), reflection-oriented teacher education views the teacher as a decision maker where professional judgment is brought to bear upon teaching situations in varied ways.

As preservice teachers engage in field experiences, they generally receive feedback from cooperating teachers and university instructors or supervisors. According to Siedentop and Tannehill, (2000) preservice teachers must practice their skills on a regular basis under conditions where best practices are evident in order to become better practitioners. This means receiving feedback from their superiors, feedback that is then used for reflection. Research suggests that teachers who engage in reflective practices do more than just practice a set of teaching behaviors as prescribed by others (Dewey, 1933; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). They identify problems, analyze possibilities and find solutions, and provide educational experiences that meet the needs of diverse learners. Consideration is given to whether goals and objectives were met, student responses to lessons learned, and the appropriateness of instructional strategies used. Reflection in teacher education has become a common practice since Schon (1983) highlighted the link between reflection and practice. Work by Loughran (2002) and others (Petrie, 1992; Richert, 1990; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991) has validated the significance of teachers constantly engaging in inquiries about their own practice through the reflective process.
Teaching experiences for preservice teachers during middle-level social studies field experiences are helpful toward effective teacher preparation. However, incorporating reflection in the experience adds a critical dimension to the mix. If reflection is not part of this process, teaching middle level social studies, like the teaching of social studies at the elementary and secondary levels, may revert to little more than factual memorization and recitation with little relevance to the lives of students. Preservice teachers must reflect upon and analyze what they saw, heard, and experienced during field experiences.

Although much research has been done in the areas of reflective practices (Loughran, 2002; Parkinson, 2005; Schon, 1987), and middle level teaching and learning (Conklin, 2008; Dickinson & McEwin, 1997; Stahler, 1995) research in using reflective practice in middle level social studies pedagogy is limited. Conklin (2007) argued that middle school social studies teachers should not only have a strong understanding of the young adolescents’ capabilities, but have knowledgeable ways to represent social studies.

Middle level teacher preparation often varies from institution to institution. Conklin (2008) suggested that middle level teachers are prepared in three different ways: in secondary, elementary, or specialized middle-level programs. However, advocates for middle level education have long argued for middle level teacher specialization (e.g., McEwin, Dickinson, & Hamilton, 2000; McEwin, Dickinson & Smith, 2003). Arguments can be made that no matter what teacher program middle school-oriented preservice teachers may be enrolled in, the understanding and implementation of best practices are paramount. Along with a full understanding of the young adolescent, successful planning, organizing and delivery of instruction are at the core of these best practices, guided by well-organized reflection.

The purpose of this article is to describe how reflective practices played a vital role in the preparation experiences of middle level preservice social studies teachers in a specialized program the past four years. I explain how these teachers used reflection in their experience and how they connected their reflective prompts to the four Domains (Danielson, 1996) in which they were evaluated (see Appendix A). Before turning to a description of these experiences, I discuss the theoretical perspective and teacher education program at the center of this article.

Theoretical Perspective

This work is based on the premise that reflection is significant in professional and pedagogical development, especially in preservice teacher preparation. It brings together the work of Dewey (1933) and others (e.g., Parkinson, 2005; Petrie, 1992; Schon, 1983; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991). I draw from ideas that see reflection as the inclusion of recognizing educational dilemmas, framing and reframing the dilemmas, experimenting to find various solutions and evaluating the consequences of the solutions (Ross, 1990). Schon (1983) posited the idea of looking to our experiences, connecting with our feelings, attending to theories in use, and building new understandings to inform our actions in the situation that is unfolding. Furthermore, Collen (1996) suggested that reflection is the thinking activity through which ideas are sharpened and clarified and that informs one’s pedagogical experiences.

Program Description

All students enrolled in this middle level program at a Midwestern university specialize in two content areas of interest. Some of these students select social studies as an area of emphasis. During the social studies pedagogy class, students are required to complete various tasks in order
to successfully complete the course. Students are required to complete 36 field hours in a middle school classroom. This assignment requires being in the classroom all day every Tuesday during the semester. Middle-level social studies pedagogy is taught for two hours a week, in which preservice teachers engage in pedagogical methods, activities, and assignments relating to current middle level social studies best practices. The activities I describe in this article were used to guide their reflective practices throughout the course. Reflective Prompts and Field Notebooks were used during their field experiences, while Peer Teaching and Professional Development activities were part of their pedagogical content course requirements.

Field Experiences

As mentioned previously, during field experiences students were required to engage in various activities to develop their teaching/learning skills. Specific requirements and guidelines are outlined in a packet given to cooperating teachers. Listed below are the requirements detailed in the packet:

- Teach and reflect on at least three formal lessons one of which will be observed by the instructor and two by the cooperating teacher.
- Reflect on specific questions connected to the four domains.
- Attend and reflect on one professional development activity.
- Develop a field experience notebook based on selected reflective questions.
- Select and document materials and experiences to show evidence of a thorough understanding of the four domains. (Planning, Classroom Environment, Instruction, Professional Responsibility).

Reflections on Classroom Teaching

Students are required to teach and reflect on their planning and delivery of each lesson taught. In reflecting on lessons, students used the following questions to guide their reflections:

- How did your lesson go? Did you do anything differently than you had planned? If yes, why did you make the changes?
- Identify a group or individual who did well with the lesson. How do you account for this?
- Identify a group or individual who had difficulty with the lesson. How do you account for this?
- What interventions could you use with this group/individual so they could achieve their learning goals?
- Relate other comments, reactions, or questions about the lesson. (Was there anything about which you felt confused, frustrated or especially good?) Why?
- If you had to reteach the lesson what changes would you make?

These reflections are evaluated by the instructor giving specific feedback in order to help the preservice teacher improve their practice. Reflections are then placed in the field notebook in the correct domain category.

Field Experience Notebook
This reflective note book consists of some personal reflective pieces as well as reflections and responses to assigned questions on the cooperating teacher’s use of time management, questioning techniques, pedagogical delivery style, classroom management, and accommodations for diverse students. A portion of the notebook is divided into four sections each containing one of the four domains. Students must include various aspects of their work to show a thorough understanding of the four domains. A major part involves reflective pieces on lesson plans, unit plans and lessons taught. This notebook is handed in to the instructor at the end of the semester for evaluation.

Reflective pieces on lessons taught provided some very interesting information. One preservice teacher reflecting on a lesson taught noted that the lesson was a success. Students were on task, well focused and engaged throughout the lesson. She believed that this was known because students were actively engaged and provided meaningful responses to the news reports discussed. She also suggested that in re-teaching the lesson the game used would be two rounds shorter, and each team would sit in a circle during the discussion of their answers. After each question asked, input would be provided from the other team. This would help to ensure that both teams took all questions seriously.

Another preservice teacher, in reflecting on planning assessment tasks reported that she was given a unique opportunity to create assessment tasks. It took hours to create the lesson as she tried to create questions that incorporated main ideas of the quarter. She noted that while this lesson was atypical, it provided her with the opportunity to practice creating a formal assessment that included binary, multiple choice, short answer and extended response. From this field assignment, she learned not to take words straight out of a text, and it is also important to create questions structured around class discussions and activities.

A third preservice teacher reflecting on her lesson mentioned that it was definitely the best she had ever taught. She felt like she had really connected with the students, they enjoyed the lesson, and few behavior issues were observed because they were so engaged. She left that day feeling great about what was accomplished and looked forward to coming in to teach the next lesson.

A fourth preservice teacher, in reporting on her daily lessons taught, observed that through the reflective process she was able to change the questioning techniques and explanation of directions for the activity between the first and fourth lessons that were taught. These changes were made because the questions asked during the first lesson didn’t come across very clear, and numerous questions were asked about how to do the activity. She also stated that during the first class she got to work out the bugs, which allowed the next three classes to go smoothly.

Reflections on Classroom Observations

Reflective Prompts

Reflective prompts are responses to series of questions designed to guide the preservice teachers’ classroom observations and cooperating teacher collaboration during the field experience. Prompts are not only used for reflective purposes, but also to help gain a better understanding of the teaching/learning process in the middle grades. Preservice teachers are required to complete one prompt bi-weekly, connect their response to the correct Domain and submit them as electronic journal reflections to the instructor for review. The following are the given prompts and the domain associated with each prompt:
Describe the climate of the classroom and discuss how you know from your observations that this classroom climate is conducive to student learning. (Domain 2: Classroom Environment)

Explain how you know from your observations that various developmental levels of individual students exist in the classroom and describe the evidence that demonstrates that the teacher is aware of the levels of students in the classroom. (Domain 3: Instruction)

Describe the behavior management plan in your classroom. What do you believe is successful and unsuccessful, and why? (Domain 2: Classroom Environment)

Discuss with your teacher how State Proficiency testing has impacted teachers, students and the school community. Describe the teachers’ responses and what you think about these tests. (Domain 4: Professional Responsibility)

Provide evidence that demonstrates that content being taught in your classroom is being assessed. Explain how and why you know from your observations that these assessments are effective for individual students and the teacher. (Domain 3: Instruction)

Reflecting on their prompts, some preservice teachers provided some very interesting comments. One preservice teacher in response to assessment tasks believed that the selected assessments were all very effective. She also believed that the anecdotal records used were effective because they showed details that can only be assessed through observation. She also noted that the rubrics were really effective because they showed exactly where students missed the mark on their essays and what needed to be worked on. (Domain 3)

Another preservice teacher felt that there was some merit in proficiency tests, but believed that too much pressure is placed on teachers and, most of all, students. She also believed that these tests do not take into account the whole aspect of a student, and do not take into account the progress certain students have made throughout the year. Overall, she hoped that these proficiency tests do not stay around, and that they find a happy medium in the classroom and the education world. (Domain 4)

A third preservice teacher agreed that there needs to be some sort of assessment to measure growth and to hold teachers accountable for what happens within their classes, but this was not it. This has altered the face of what teaching and school is all about and many teachers are beginning to say that this is not what they signed up to do. The stress put forth on the teachers and thus imparted on the students is insane. (Domain 3)

A fourth preservice teacher in response to the classroom climate reflected that the teacher was the leading determent of the environment within this classroom, and a wonderful classroom balance of tolerance, respect, independence, compassion, and learning were established. All of these elements created an environment where students wanted to learn and were not afraid to volunteer and participate. (Domain 2)

Reflections on Course Content Activities

Peer Teaching

As part of the course requirements, preservice teachers are required to teach a mini lesson to their peers. The lesson is evaluated by their peers using an evaluation instrument based on aspects of the Domains. After the lesson is taught constructive criticism is provided by their peers and instructor. They are then required to evaluate themselves and then reflect on the lesson based on the following:
• Identify those things that occurred in the lesson that let you know students were productively engaged.
• How do you know students learned what was intended and that your goals/objectives were met?
• If you taught this lesson again, what would you do differently and why?

From conversations with preservice teachers and reading their reflective responses they felt strongly that having to reflect on the lessons taught helped them to fully analyze what they had done in order to come up with ways to improve their teaching. In reflecting on a lesson in response to student engagement one preservice teacher stated that students were productively engaged with their peers during the exploration activity finding similarities between the Magna Carta and founding U.S. Documents. Another in response to re-teaching the lesson indicated that some of the concepts taught would be made more concise on the power point, and he would refrain from using ambiguous words during the lesson. Finally, a third preservice teacher in response to meeting the goals and objectives of the lesson stated that completion of the concept maps correctly, proved that she had met her objectives for the lesson.

Professional Development

Preservice teachers are required to attend one social studies professional development activity. This may be a local, state, national, some form of faculty professional development at the school at which they are assigned, or any other professional development program as approved by the instructor. At the completion of the professional development opportunity, they are required to write a short reflective piece on their experience. In reflecting, the following questions are considered:

• Where/when was the professional development opportunity held and who were the sponsors?
• What did you learn about middle school social studies teaching/learning?
• How could you apply what you have learned in your social studies classes?
• What is your personal response to this experience?
• How do these kinds of experience support your growth as a middle level educator?

Preservice teachers found this to be a rewarding experience in helping them to grow as professionals. Reflecting on their professional development experience, one preservice teacher felt that this experience really brought to her attention that student motivation can sometimes be affected by lack of school supplies. She realized that when students don’t do their homework or try to avoid certain assignments, we as teachers are quick to jump to conclusions as to why this is occurring. In reality we should first make sure that students have the necessary tools they may need to complete assignments.

Another stated that taking part in this professional development activity was a great experience for her. She was not even aware that the resources discussed were available to teachers. She left with a great feeling of pride for her community, and felt that it was wonderful to see all the methods people in the community were using to help our students succeed.

A third preservice teacher reported that as a future middle school Language Arts and Social Studies teacher, she took away some important lessons. Reading and writing workshops could be
used to inspire students to see themselves as critical thinkers as well as problem solvers. Middle school students who are learning to think abstractly must be able to analyze information and find ways to achieve. She believed that she must be a role model for her students, and show them through Social Studies how to be a good citizen by exposing them to volunteer work, and careful consideration of current issues impacting society and the world.

Finally, a fourth preservice teacher stated that from this experience, she was taught new philosophies or focal points to use in her future classroom. For example, in order to help students improve in their academic abilities, as a teacher she will need to focus on the students’ strengths and not mainly on their weaknesses. Teachers cannot continue to build knowledge on a weak foundation. Therefore, teachers must pinpoint strengths in students and continue to build on them in order to keep confidence at a high level. She thought that this professional development experience was outstanding, and was glad that she attended.

Concluding Procedures

During the final class of the semester preservice teachers are required to reflect on their total experience in oral form. From their responses, it became very clear that these reflective tasks helped them to grow academically as well as professionally in their preparation as future teachers of middle level social studies. Many of them felt that reflection is at the heart of teaching and learning and must be practiced by all middle social studies teachers if they are going to be effective teachers in the classroom.

Conclusion

This paper describes effective strategies used in a middle level Social Studies pedagogy course to guide preservice teachers’ understanding of the significance of using reflective practices in the teaching/learning process. The main focus was on helping preservice teachers use reflective practices during their field experiences and pedagogical methods activities while making connections to the domains in which they were evaluated. Reflective prompts and field notebooks were used as reflective tools during field experiences, while reflections on peer teaching and professional development experience were used during their course content activities. Preservice teachers used these strategies during this course to strengthen their ability to deliver instruction, manage their classrooms effectively, as well as to show professionalism. When reflection is part of the planning/delivery process teachers can identify strengths and weaknesses, and thus make adjustments to better their performance. It also implies that teachers become active knowledge producers as they continually learn to address the problems of practice they encounter to meet the unpredictable learning needs of all of their students (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The value of reflection for these preservice teachers is that it gave them confidence to think about what they were doing and reason through their case to make their pedagogy more appropriate to the situation. Danielson (1996) posited that the ability to reflect on teaching is the mark of true professionalism. She argues that through reflection, real growth and excellence are possible leading to the expansion of their repertoire of practice.

These middle level preservice teachers assumed that their role is to impart content knowledge to students. During their pedagogical experiences they embraced the theory and practical aspects of the course. Along with this, from analyzing their oral and written reflections, it became clear that they were able to gain a good understanding of the domains and their application to the teaching learning process. They also realized that reflective practices as indicated in research (Dewey, 1933; Loughran, 1997; Schon, 1983; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991) must guide their work on a daily basis.
As teacher educators, it is our responsibility to constantly assess the adequacy of the preparation of middle level social studies preservice teachers if we are going to help them to be effective in the classroom. The strategies discussed in this article if applied effectively can be very useful in helping middle level teacher educators in all content areas prepare teachers that are well equipped with the strategies needed to become reflective practitioners in the classroom.

References

Appendix A

Components of Four Domains

The four Domains based on the work of Danielson (1996) consist of four areas—Planning and Preparation, Classroom Environment, Instruction, and Professional Responsibilities. For specific purposes here I am going to highlight the ones that may be appropriate for preservice teachers in field experiences.

Domain 1: Planning and Preparation.
Components:
- Demonstrating Knowledge of Content and Pedagogy (knowledge of content, knowledge of prerequisite relationships, knowledge of content-related)
- Demonstrating Knowledge of Students (characteristics of age group, varied approaches to learning, skills and knowledge, and interests and cultural heritage)
- Selecting Instructional Goals (suitability for diverse learners, value and clarity)
- Demonstrating Knowledge of Resources (teaching and students)
- Designing Coherent Instruction (learning activities, instructional materials and resources, instructional groups, lesson and unit structure)
- Assessing Student Learning (congruence with instructional goals, criteria and standards used for planning)

Domain 2: Classroom Environment.
Components:
- Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport (interaction with students, student interaction)
- Establishing a Culture for Learning (importance of content, expectations for learning and achievement)
- Managing Classroom Procedures (instructional groups, transitions, materials and supplies)
- Managing Student Behavior (expectations, student behavior, response to student behavior)
- Organizing Physical Space (safety and arrangement of furniture, accessibility to learning and physical resources)

Domain 3: Instruction.
The following five components are part of this domain:
- Communicating Clearly and Accurately (following directions and procedures)
- Questioning and Discussion Techniques (quality of questions, discussion and student participation)
- Student Engagement in Learning (content, activities and assignments, student grouping, instructional materials and resources)
Providing Feedback
Demonstrating flexibility and Responsiveness (lesson adjustment, response to students)

Domain 4: Professional Responsibilities.
Components:
• Reflecting on Teaching (accuracy, use in future teaching)
• Maintaining Accurate records (student completion of assignments, student progress in learning)
• Growing and Developing Professionally
• Showing Professionalism

About the Author

Winston Vaughan is an associate professor of education at Xavier University. His areas of interest include middle-level social studies education, diversity studies, and history and philosophy of education. He can be reached at vaughan@xavier.edu.