Win-Win-Win: Using NSRF Protocols in a Partnership Between a County Museum, University Pre-Service Education Students, and Elementary Students

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The 21st Century Schools initiative encourages K-12 schools across America to actively engage in global studies, real-world problem-solving, and building geographic literacy. However, social studies instruction time is a low priority because schools are striving to build competency in literacy and mathematics. In the field of education, the emphasis on spending considerable amounts of human and financial capital on these latter two content areas is widespread. Through their analyses of NCLB data, Jennings and Rentner (2006) found that 71% of the public school districts reported a reduction of time spent on instruction of non-tested content areas; and social studies was most frequently sacrificed. Therefore, after asking numerous principals for an opportunity to host my elementary pre-service teachers for a social studies methods field experience, I was universally informed that they only wanted support in literacy and math. Over the past decade in field experiences, the pre-service teachers have been told by classroom teachers that they only have time to read the textbook and answer questions at the end of chapters, or complete worksheets and tests created by the publishers.

Knowing the best practices of teaching social studies, I decided to transform the formerly adequate but mediocre lesson preparation to include an engaging, real-world placement at the Porter County Museum of History in Valparaiso, Indiana. This location offers numerous primary sources on which to base social studies lessons for the pre-service teachers to create. In order to satisfy teachers' main focus on literacy, all lessons needed to include a literacy component based on the Common Core and Indiana State English Language Arts standards. Combining these factors with NSRF protocols, the pre-service teachers had multiple opportunities to practice giving and receiving professional feedback while improving the quality of both their lesson development and teaching skills. Thus began the partnership among the county museum, university pre-service teachers, and local elementary students.

A Valparaiso University pre-service teacher discusses prior knowledge about boats and Lake Michigan with visiting elementary students.

The process to introduce the pre-service teachers to the museum required several necessary

steps over the course of about three weeks. Establishing contact with the principal and teachers at a local elementary school happened first, to obtain specific information on elementary class demographics and curriculum content sequencing. At the beginning of the semester, the class norms were established in the university course, then the NSRF North-South-East-West Compass Points exercise was presented to gain insights on group work preferences and impact on group dynamics.

Next, the university class took a field trip to the Porter County Museum of History to learn about its exhibits. Given opportunities to brainstorm lesson ideas and use knowledge of developmental levels of specific grade levels, the pre-service teachers referred to Social Studies and English Language Arts standards. The next class period, pre-service teachers brought their initial ideas on possible formative assessments, standards, and activities to their groups and used the NSRF Tuning Protocol to flesh out their lessons. An important piece of this process was to develop critical thinking questions and activities around the artifacts and exhibits in the museum. Then the Tuning Protocol was repeated with a second draft, and I then gave my professional feedback to help guide lesson plan development. Finally, I reminded the pre-service teachers of the specific demographics of the class they will teach in order to assure that appropriate differentiation is provided for English Language Learners or students with specific learning needs.

Valparaiso first graders perform a reader's theater script about a hand-crafted dubout canoe created by young women from Michigan City.

After all this preliminary work, field trip day at the museum for the elementary students finally arrived. Three to five teaching stations were located in different rooms of the museum. Approximately half of the pre-service teachers taught their lessons while the other half observed and served as tour guides for the elementary students. Before the rotation ended, the teacher candidates practiced giving a simple assessment, then collected student performance data to analyze later. When the elementary students left the museum, the pre-service teachers met in small groups to share specific warm and cool professional feedback using the Success Analysis Protocol. Student comments reinforced countless benefits of practicing the protocols, as stated below:

While I was always open to what my peers were suggesting to me, it was difficult to think on the spot on how to tell others that they could improve their lessons. My favorite strategy that we used to give feedback was when each group presented their reader's theater ideas and everybody wrote their ideas on Post-its to give to them later. This took the pressure off and allowed me to write suggestions while they were presenting. Although sometimes difficult, providing and receiving feedback is a very important quality to have when developing lessons and ideas to include in my classroom. - University Student 1

In this class, we have spent a lot of time working on listening to the ideas of our peers and giving constructive feedback. This has been a great experience because I have learned how to share ideas with others. The feedback I have received has been extremely positive. Sometimes it can be difficult to determine where I am headed with some of my lesson ideas. Having other people that I can talk to, ask suggestions of and bounce ideas off of is really helpful. There have been things in my lessons that have needed to be changed for reasons that I simply overlooked, but that I was able to fix because of collaborating with my peers. – University Student 2

Pre-service teachers completed the final portion of the lesson, which was a written assignment requiring students to reflect deeply upon one's own teaching, student performance, and the feedback given by peers. Several of these reflections included specific acknowledgment of professional growth:

Just as elementary students thrive from positive feedback and beneficial critiques, I found discussing my ideas and opening myself up to knowledgeable feedback consistently

resulted in the betterment of my work. I believe it also previewed what the professional environment will be like in my future school of employment. From these experiences, I believe that peer review and feedback will be included in my future classroom as an integral part of the learning process. – Student 3

When considering my peers' suggestions along with the clarifying questions that they asked, I realized how confused my students could have been or certain points which I needed to make clearer within my lesson. My peers also opened my eyes to some misunderstanding that my students could have, allowing me to again strengthen my lesson. [They] also helped to identify additional standards in which I could apply to my lessons or ways that I could alter my lessons slightly to more effectively meet the standards that I desired. – Student 4

This partnership proved positive all around. Pre-service teachers practiced developing and teaching museum-specific integrated lessons, the museum received a large number of visitors who returned with friends and family, and the elementary students and their teachers experienced a high-quality, local, inexpensive field trip, building and reinforcing social studies and English language arts content knowledge in an engaging manner. Every one of the teachers requested that we continue to include their classes in our field trip program because the students learned much social studies content in a short amount of time. Additional teachers have benefited as the partnership between the university and museum now includes reader's theater lessons created in the "Fine Arts in the Elementary Classroom" course. Most importantly, incorporating NSRF protocols contributed meaningfully to enhancing the future teachers' personal and professional efficacy levels.

Jennings, J. & Rentner, D. (2006). Ten big effects of the no child left behind act on public schools. Phi Delta Kappan, 88(2), 110-113.

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