

An Intersection of Interest

The Millennial Generation and an Alternative World Language Teacher Education Program

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Abstract

The Ann Arbor Languages Partnership (A2LP)—between Ann Arbor Public Schools and the University of Michigan's School of Education—recruits Spanish-speaking undergraduates from many academic majors to teach Spanish in the district's 3rd and 4th grade classrooms during the academic year. The partnership allows the district to offer students a world language experience they otherwise would not have, and gives the University an opportunity to explore an alternative mode of teacher education specifically aimed at the learning preferences of this generation of college students. These students—mostly non-education majors—are members of the “millennial” generation, characterized by a sense of being “special,” an expectation that their opinions will be sought and respected on all things, an orientation towards teamwork and social justice, and skills and interests in technology, especially the Internet.

Methods

Data come from two sources:

- Reflective writing in response to prompts (5 Apprentice Teachers (ATs): 3 new, 2 returning)
- Focus groups with 3-10 new ATs

We identified several elements of A2LP that provide opportunities for ATs to learn:

- Training activities (not discussion-based, e.g., lecture)
- Written reflections
- Seminar/whole group discussions
- One-on-one discussions with the seminar instructor or observer
- Classroom/practice teaching

Based on this we conducted issue-focused content analysis of written reflections and focus group transcriptions to identify those elements from which ATs learned most and best (Weiss, 1994). We then added nuance to initial codings that discuss the above elements to reflect ATs' more detailed emotional and intellectual engagement with the work of teaching and learning, looking especially for change over time in ATs' thinking. At the beginning of the Winter semester, we used this feedback and research to dramatically revise expectations for weekly seminar meetings and reflective writing.

Implications for Teaching Millennials

1. Seek millennials' feedback on the course's structure and content throughout the course, not just at the end in formal evaluations. Collect this feedback in various ways, through emails, CTools posts, written work, or even focus groups. Use this feedback.
2. Set guidelines for millennials' feedback, asking them:
 - to consider the value of activities specifically in relation to the goals of the course
 - for thoughts on how they learn best (give them options to consider)
 - for suggestions on ways they could share or demonstrate what they know.
3. Build millennials' skills in self-assessment and reflection through “exit tickets.” These quick reflections encourage students to consider what they learned in a class session and how it is going to be useful to them in the future. These can also be used to assess what students are still uncertain about. Again, make an effort to respond to these exit tickets.

This study is a two-tiered investigation:

1. From what programmatic structures—role play and modeling, seminar discussions, written reflections, formal and informal peer interactions, and classroom teaching experience—do Apprentice Teachers (ATs) learn best about the practice of teaching?
2. In their individual reflections, which elements of the teaching and learning process are ATs most engaged with emotionally and intellectually?

Top themes in REFLECTIVE WRITING

Expecting the unexpected Self as a learner
Observation of students Teaching techniques
Practicing and rehearsing Working with mentor teachers Scripting and planning
Being a professional teacher Teaching with a partner Classroom management
Teaching philosophy Peers' ideas

Top themes in FOCUS GROUPS

Classroom teaching Peers' ideas Working with mentor teachers
Training activities Demo lessons
Observations Peers Scripting/planning Experience as learner
Explicit instruction Reflective writing
Seminar and whole group discussions Interactions with observer/seminar instructor
Lecture/input sessions Readings
Seminar/whole group discussion



Quotes from Participants

Classroom teaching:

The hands-on experience of teaching is more salient and empowering than all other elements of the course.

“I think that just the whole process in general of learning how to teach is just reversed. Instead of sitting in a classroom and reading about it, we just go out there and do it, and then learn from it, and reflect on it and learn from it even more. So I think it's just kind of the opposite of a normal class—sure it has the basics: the homework and occasional reading, but instead of focusing on the readings, it's more focused on the hands-on stuff. I learn more from that than reading a book and forgetting...”

Reflective writing:

ATs value reflection highly, though the act of having to create a written artifact of that reflection can be inhibiting.

“Sometimes when I do have a dull week and it has to be reflected on... it kind of forces me to think. That could be good or bad because it may make me try to make something up.... It can also be good because it forces me to do that and actually think about it and how to handle it.”

Seminar discussion:

Seminar, which serves as the site of group-based reflection and problem-solving, provides emotional and intellectual support without which the task of teaching Spanish might be more superficial.

“... I think seminar is a good way to guide our thoughts. Honestly, if I didn't have seminar, I'd go in there and teach and get through, but I wouldn't have thought nearly as deeply because of seminar. All the different things they point out and kind of guide your reflections when you teach, how students learn, all that, I think it's a great help, and I'm really glad I'm in seminar.”

References

Weiss, R. S. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York: The Free Press.

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