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The Perceptions of Preservice Teachers on Time Devoted to Post-Teaching Discussion Sessions Through Communities of Practice

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Introduction

There are numerous theories about human learning: behaviorism, cognitive, humanistic, and social theories (Learning Theories Site Map, 2013). One theory of learning involves a deepening process of participation in communities of practice, which involve a cluster of individuals who share a common interest of concern or passion and who learn from each other through the process of sharing experiences and information about how to improve such interest (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This concept involves a discussion among group members about ways of doing and approaching things that are elaborated upon to a significant extent to facilitate learning and enhance performance (Smith, 2009). Frequent discourse and active and social engagement produce a shared construction of knowledge that contin-

ues over time (MacPhail, Patton, Parker, & Tannehill, 2014). The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of preservice teachers about time devoted to post-teaching discussion sessions through communities of practice.

Literature Review

Many people strive for improvements. In order to obtain success, many people reflect on their actions and consider what could be done more effectively next time around. Reflection involves “the intentional attempt to synthesize, abstract, and articulate the key lessons taught by experience; reflecting on what has been learned makes experience more productive; and reflection builds one’s confidence in the ability to achieve a goal (i.e., self-efficacy), which in turn translates into higher rates of learning” (Di Stefano, Gino, Pisano, & Staats, 2014, p. 1). Reflection can serve as a useful tool for learning and is often used in communities of practice.

A theory about learning called a community of practice consists of three distinct characteristics: the domain, the community, and the practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). A network of connections between people form an identity by a shared domain of interest. The group values their collective competence and learn from each other in their joint activities and discussions. In addition, they build relationships that enable them to learn from each other as they care about their standing with each other. The members of such a community develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The indi-

viduals within the group interact over a period of time. This theory of learning directly involves practitioners in the management of the information they need individually and collectively to strive for success in their work. The members “engage in the development of strategic capabilities critical for achieving the goals of the organization(s) they belong to” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

This learning theory was developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in the late 1980s and early 1990s and was applied to businesses that were interested in knowledge management. Now, however, it is used in other practice fields (Smith, 2009). More recently, a community of practice has become “the foundation of a perspective on knowing and learning that informs efforts to create learning systems in various sectors and at various levels of scale, from local communities, to single organizations, partnerships, cities, regions, and the entire world” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Specifically, the literature in Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) has found that learning takes place within social practice (Parker, Patton, Madden, & Sinclair, 2010) which inspired colleagues to consider using authentic communities of practice within the PETE program (MacPhail, Patton, Parker, & Tannehill, 2014).

PETE wants to develop teachers who are able to teach for higher order and conceptual learning. There are several theories about learning, one of which refers to a deepening process of participation through learning with others with a shared outcome. The ultimate goal for PETE faculty is to become more knowledgeable about the importance of creating a community of prac-

tice. This study, therefore will shed light regarding the importance of creating these opportunities in their undergraduate teacher licensure programs.

Methods

Participants and Setting

Participants included 8 preservice teachers (4 males, 4 females) enrolled in an undergraduate elementary physical-education teacher-licensure methods course. All but one preservice teacher were seeking dual licensure for physical education. These preservice teachers were in their junior year, approximately two semesters away from their student teaching practicum. The preservice teachers had been in classes together prior to the course, such as the prerequisite course in the previous semester and other courses in their major. Eight weeks of the course was dedicated to providing opportunities for the preservice teachers to apply their knowledge through practical teaching experiences with elementary-aged learners, as well to provide them with opportunities to observe others teaching.

Following teaching and observational experiences, preservice teachers were situated in a “learning space” to debrief their experiences. The debriefing session was called a “Coffee Talk,” which took place in a comfortable, relaxed environment where the preservice teachers shared and discussed their observational notes with each other as well as received feedback in regards to teaching performances from the perspectives of observers, a professor, and a teacher assistant. The observers followed a rubric/checklist to notice when other students were teaching, then discussed those observational notes in the “Coffee Talks.” Those anecdotal notes were intentional.



Seating formation for “Coffee Talks”

There was a total of four “Coffee Talk” meetings and each session lasted 1.5 hours, with a total of 6 hours devoted to discussing teaching experiences. The first three “Coffee Talks” took place during class time in a commuter lounge at Bridgewater State University, which was in the Rondieau Campus Center, on the opposite side of campus from the assigned classroom. Preservice teachers brought their breakfast food and drinks to these “Coffee Talks,” along with necessary documents for discussion. The area was a somewhat quiet space during these morning debriefing sessions. The class started off together in one large circle facing inwards. Eventually, the class divided into their teaching groups of 4 preservice teachers with either the professor or teacher assistant sitting with them to facilitate the discussion. The pictures below show an example of the chair formations for these discussions and the lounge itself.

The fourth and final “Coffee Talk” was at an actual coffee shop in the town’s center, just a short ride from campus. This “Coffee Talk” immediately began with the



Lounge located in Bridgewater State University’s Rondieau Campus Center

two teaching groups working separately, and then they came together toward the end. Seated at a table, preservice teachers drank their purchased beverages as they provided each other with feedback and suggestions.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection included semi-structured interviews, semi-structured focus group interviews, artifacts (i.e., lesson reflections, preservice observational field notes, and summary reports), and observations. Interview questions included the following:

- How did you contribute to the “Coffee Talk”?
- What was the value of the “Coffee Talk”?
- How does the change of scenery from a traditional classroom to a lounge play a role in the “Coffee Talk”?
- How did the “Coffee Talk” make you feel when you gave constructivist feedback?
- How did the “Coffee Talk” make you feel when you received constructivist feedback?
- How have the relationships developed be-

tween you and your classmates during and as a result of the “Coffee Talk?”

All audio recorded interviews, totaling 55 minutes, were transcribed verbatim. The data from the interviews and artifacts were qualitatively analyzed using open-axial coding over one semester (Corbin & Strauss, 1998).

The first interview was broken up into two focus groups of four preservice teachers each. Each group was interviewed for 20 minutes. For the second interview, the number of participants was reduced to one member from each focus group in order to experiment with whether responses would be more authentic without the pressure of group members hearing each other’s comments. Both individuals were interviewed together for 10 minutes. The third interview only consisted of one preservice teacher who was interviewed for 5 minutes. Each interview was conducted at Bridgewater State University. A list of pre-developed open-ended questions were asked, as well as certain follow-up questions that were used to help participants expand on their answers. After two “Coffee Talks,” the preservice teachers typed up reflections in regards to their experiences with these post-teaching discussions.

Procedures

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted before contact with participants. Once approved, the potential participants were given a consent form explaining the purpose of the study and what they could expect as a participant to review and sign before proceeding with this study. Once consent was confirmed, the participants were to answer questions in audio recorded interviews after each “Coffee Talk” and to send

in a typed reflection to gather information about their perceptions about the time devoted to post-teaching discussion sessions through communities of practice. Prior to each interview, each participant’s verbal assent was obtained.

Results

Data analysis resulted in the identification of three themes with respect to time devoted to post-teaching discussion sessions through communities of practice. For these participants 1) the environment, 2) exchange of ideas, and 3) the relationships built among each other influenced their understanding of the process of learning to teach.

Environment: “a warm, comfortable area where I am able to be honest and open-minded”

One benefit of the “Coffee Talk” was sharing observations and feedback in a relaxed environment rather than in a traditional classroom. The location of the “Coffee Talk” took place in another academic building with lounge chairs in a circular formation facing inward. The preservice teachers felt more at ease conversing with one another when going over the evaluations while sitting in the comfortable chairs. The preservice teachers commented on the “laid back” style of the “Coffee Talk” and mentioned that being in such an environment made them more willing to share.

The organization of groups also impacted the preservice teachers’ perceptions. The start of “Coffee Talks” involved 8 preservice teachers, 1 professor, and 1 teacher assistant in a large circle facing inwards. The large group discussed broad topics. After several minutes, the class broke off into their assigned teaching groups

which narrowed down to 4 preservice teachers and an authority figure. In the smaller groups, the preservice teachers gave specific feedback to the individual. One preservice teacher commented on the 1 group of 8, “I like to hear from everybody and hear what other people need to work on too because it is probably something we all need to work on, so it’s good to that sense in a big group.” However, a majority of the preservice teachers preferred 2 groups of 4. Several commented that they were more willing to talk and give constructive feedback in the smaller groups compared to a larger group. Although the class preferred the smaller groups, the preservice teachers commented positively about having the two group arrangements in the “Coffee Talks,” since both setups were useful in their own distinct ways.

Exchange of ideas: “pick each other’s brains”

After reflecting on their teaching experiences, the preservice teachers came together in the post-teaching discussion session to exchange useful knowledge and feedback among each other. One preservice teacher said, “every time we have a coffee talk I try to incorporate something I learned into my next lesson, whether if it was something I liked that someone else did or something that I need to work on.” The preservice teachers appreciated having others’ perspectives on their teachings. The observers, professor, and teacher assistant were able to give their inputs to the preservice teacher and share suggestions on what to improve. Many of the preservice teachers were unaware of their actions until someone else pointed them out. The preservice teachers became more aware of their teaching styles and lesson planning following each “Coffee Talk.”

The flow of the discussions allowed the students to feel

relaxed while conversing within their group. Pre-developed questions guided the preservice teachers in each discussion. Preservice teachers were able to freely discuss any questions or ideas that they may have. The preservice teachers were able to “pick each other’s brains” in the post-teaching discussion sessions.

Relationships: “I don’t think this would have worked as well if I did not know you guys that well”

It was advantageous to have preexisting relationships prior to each “Coffee Talk.” These eight preservice teachers were classmates in other undergraduate courses before taking the teacher-licensure methods course. A handful of the preservice teachers believed the “Coffee Talks” would not have been as effective if they did not know each other beforehand. The preservice teachers trusted one another to provide authentic feedback and thoughtful advice, since they all wanted to help each other become better teachers.

The relationships among the preservice teachers grew over the course. In the beginning of the semester, they viewed each other as strictly classmates. However, their bonds increased with the service from the “Coffee Talks,” as they got to know each other a little bit more and felt a sense of care from their classmates. One preservice teacher commented it is “good to have classmates who care about you and want to give you advice so you can be the best that you can be.” As a result, the preservice teachers appreciated the post-teaching discussions for their relaxed environment and the beneficial feedback they received from trusted classmates.

Conclusion

Results from this study indicated that post-teaching discussions through communities of practice positively impacted the preservice teachers. First, discussing teaching experiences in a comfortable environment allowed preservice teachers to share more information in comparison to the traditional classroom. Second, the authentic conversations allowed preservice teachers to reflect and use the applicable information for future teachings. Third, preservice teachers built trust in one another as genuine feedback was provided.

Although the preservice teachers appreciated the time devoted to the post-teaching discussion sessions, it is unlikely they will continue that type of practice outside of the classroom due to conflicting schedules. Even though they will not designate a time to meet up, the preservice teachers will continue to use each other as resources by reaching out to one another in passing or in class. If someone were to ask for help from the other preservice teachers, everyone would be willing to help out.

The social learning space in a community of practice enables “genuine interactions among participants, who can bring to the learning table both their experience of practice and their experience of themselves in that practice” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research (NCDDR) and the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) worked together to further “expand their common understanding and to jointly address issues related to research quality, standards, and guidelines. To achieve this, the NCDDR modeled the use of Communities of Practice

as a knowledge translation strategy” (National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research). Several opportunities, benefits, and guiding principles of the NCDDR Communities of Practice have been presented. The activities emerged from their study indicate that this concept is a “positive strategy to encourage NIDRR grantees to work together in areas of common interest” (National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research). The individuals were able to work “collegially to share and learn from each others’ expertise, and to use their collective knowledge to build the practice of disability and rehabilitation research” (National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research). The study conducted by NCDDR and NIDRR revealed that its group members used each other as reliable resources to help expand their knowledge of a desired topic. The process of such learning theory was investigated in other career areas to seek any benefits outside of NCDDR and NIDRR.

The communities of practice strategy was investigated with preservice physical educators and showed that the learning theory is applicable in other areas of work. The preservice teachers enjoyed meeting frequently to use the positive strategy to achieve a common interest among all, which was to improve teaching performances. The participants came together to help each other become better physical education teachers. Feedback about teaching performances and ideas were shared among trusted group members. Communities of practice ought to be used in the education field and other work areas to help enhance a common, desired outcome of work improvement among all group members.

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About the Author



Sheila O'Sullivan is graduating in May 2017 with a major in Physical Education. Her research was completed in the fall of 2016 under the mentorship of Dr. Misti Neutzling (Movement Arts, Health Promotion, and Leisure Studies) and made possible with funding provided by Bridgewater

State University's Undergraduate Research Semester Grant. Sheila presented this research at the 29th Annual Ethnographic & Qualitative Research Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada in January 2017. Sheila's future goal is to attend graduate school with a concentration in Human Performance and Health Fitness. She hopes to teach Physical Education at the elementary school level and would also like to secure a coaching position working with high school athletes.