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Using Student Feedback to Fuel the Family Project

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Inspiration

Supporting and observing the growth of individuals is the reason I teach. A student quote from April 2015 summarizes the importance of the assignment described in this essay: *"The Family Project that we did this semester greatly improved my learning. For the Family Project, I was able to take a topic I found interesting and turn it into an activity that I could promote in my classroom to families as a way to enhance language development. The process we went through in completing that assignment will definitely help me in the future."*

I measure my teaching effectiveness by analyzing information from classroom observations, student written reflections and formal evaluations to look for ways to improve. I use the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) to systematically investigate student learning, document effective practices, and to critically self-reflect to determine possible ways to teach better.

How did the family project evolve? The spark was ignited while listening to Lilian Katz, a highly respected expert in early childhood education, a keynote address at a conference. She described the project approach. Her powerful and moving words triggered my own reflection: What factors facilitate teachers' implementation of the project approach? I teach coursework in pedagogical methods as well as supervise practica where I noted that students rarely used this approach with children. Could I create an assignment where students could learn in a more effective and authentic way?

The project approach is set of teaching strategies used to guide children through in-depth studies with intentional teaching (Pianta, 2006). A project is an in-depth investigation or research effort of an important topic by either individually or in a small group or an individual task, focused on finding answers to questions posed by the learner. The goal of a project is to learn more about a topic, take initiative, assume responsibility, make decisions and choices, and pursue interests (Katz, 1994).

Teachers typically learn how to implement the Project approach as part of their teacher education programs, through in-service training, or by accessing video or reading materials (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2009). But do they use the approach to complete assignments? I wondered how I could intentionally share control of a family project in a Language Development and Early Literacy course and have students actively engage in the Project approach.

Creation

To build the fire, I would need to make changes based on my awareness of students, context of the course, and my teaching style. Junior- and senior-level students in the Early Education and Care Major enroll in the Language Development course. Most of the students are working with children and know the course will help them prepare for a teaching position working with children from birth through age five years.

The course is one of the five required 300-level courses in the major. In the course, students have three major assignments, one of which needs to meet National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards in the program. The assignment needs to provide evidence that students: understand diverse family structures and influences; use culturally competent practices to support and communicate with individual children and families; and are able to connect families to community resources such as public schools (NAEYC standard 2).

Structurally, I designed the assignment as five components permitting feedback loops yet allowing students freedom to be creative. The components in order of completion are: a Know What How Learn (KWHL) chart, an assessment plan rubric, phase 2 report, final presentation with a revised assessment plan, and a reflection about project and presentation. I used curriculum design principles based on constructivism and learner-centered teaching focusing on the content, the process, application and skills for future learning (Blumberg, 2014; Fink, 2003). I wanted to include small group learning activities and opportunities for students to learn the skills and dispositions so that they will be able to define problems, locate appropriate resources and information, collaborate, and apply what they learned to new situations. The assignment would need clear expectations yet the flexibility for responding to student feedback as the project progressed. I decided to create a new assignment called the Family Project. My biggest challenge would be to encourage student responsibly while meeting the accreditation standards.

Implementation

Now I was ready to start the fire. I introduced it in the Fall-2012 semester and continue to use the assignment while revising it every semester. I introduced the assignment this way: "In ECPK 320, you will have the opportunity to design a project that will allow you to explore family and community involvement in a meaningful manner." I let students know that I needed their verbal and written comments to continually improve assignments. Besides the written reflection as a means to gather data, there was time during class for students to work on assignment components so I can listen to concerns and questions and respond. Here are examples of changes made to components while in class.

KWHL

The first log is the KWHL chart. In April 2013 a student asked, *How do we fill in the "What I learned column?"* She helped me see the error on the document. I responded by having them darken the column on the template to add clarity and then changed the template for the next semester.

Assessment Plan Rubric

The questions asked in class resulting in the change (in bold) to template in October 2013 done by revising during class.

Criteria which define & describe the important components of the project
The project identifies factors that may assist or delay a child's language development. [pick one]
The project shows how activities, materials, & equipment can be adapted to the language needs of each child. [think about age appropriateness]
The project demonstrates an appreciation of each child in the context of their family, socioeconomic circumstances [use language such as free or low-cost] , language [use language such as linguistically diverse] , culture [use language such as multicultural] , & community [use language such as community resource] . The student responds to cultural and language diversity.
The project provides information so families can create a play-based developmentally appropriate environment where literacy [insert your literacy focus here] is promoted.

Phase 2 Report

During our class working time on the project, the most asked question was, *How do I cite sources in APA? What is APA?* In response, during our class I found a worksheet on citing APA sources and used it the next class session. As a class, we decided to extend due dates to allow time to learn the skill of proper citation. The document is now part of the resource packet for the project and is posted on the course management system.

Presentation

Students seem to prefer the poster session model of presenting rather than individually presenting to the class. In the fall of 2012 and spring 2013, several students wanted to show slideshows so the class decided how to adapt the presentation style to allow for their requests.

It appears that students appreciate time in class to work on the project components: *"The aspects of the class that helped me learn was the projects and the group work because you could bounce ideas off your classmates and ask for explanation when you needed some help. The teacher and peer feedback was great when it came to developing and fixing some of my assignments. Professor Eliason was very helpful when it came to any questions that I had on an assignment and she was able to better explain through examples."*

Reflection

"Honestly, I don't think I would have Professor Eliason change anything about this project. I liked the way it was completed in steps; it allowed us to know if we were on the right track before finishing the project and doing it all wrong." (April 2015)

Most of the feedback from students is positive and describes the benefit of using a project approach. For instance: *"It is a fun way to get the class involved with families. I believe I learned a lot while researching this topic and I enjoyed sharing that information with others."* And, *"being able to do research on something that I was curious about."* Students appreciate having a project to develop skills, such as public speaking, creating brochures, designing rubrics that transfer to their current or future work as an early educator: *"Finding research based information that was very helpful in my learning about something that could actually used in my everyday work. When writing I realized that reading has a lot to do with writing and after that I didn't have much trouble anymore."*

Students appreciate the structure of the project. *"I think it was planned out well and I think you gave clear and precise directions. We had certain due dates that were given to us and I think that was helpful"* And, *"We were able to pick our own topic and how we wanted to present it."* Specifically, students mentioned that the components, pace, guidance, support, and feedback loops were helpful: *"I liked the way it was completed in steps; it allowed us to know if we were on the right track before finishing the project and doing it all wrong."*

KWHL

In response to the feedback, I added samples of past student work modeling each component to either the course management system or to the assignment handout: *"Next time you do this project it may be beneficial to have more samples for KWHL charts and put more emphasis on the importance of doing the KWHL chart correctly."*

Assessment Plan Rubric

The assessment plan was a typical hurdle for students; as this student summarized, *"Throughout my college career this was probably the first time I have had to create a grading tool. Normally, I would probably be excited to have the opportunity to grade myself, but here I was most distraught and worried as I was creating my own guidelines to follow rather than having set limits to keep in mind."* The assessment plan seems to make students feel a bit overwhelmed and uncomfortable: *"I couldn't design the project my way because I had to consider the rubric."* I added more in-class time to work on this component to provide individual guidance so students can create a project that meets the program requirements yet allows them to explore their topic.

Phase 2 Report

Finding and organizing research in the Phase 2 report was challenging for some: *"I never fully learned to successfully skim an article to find the key points."* Several students mentioned citing sources in APA as well as being frustrated with the amount of time it takes to find reliable and appropriate research especially with they found contradicting opinions or information that challenged their assumptions about families or literacy learning: *"The challenges I encountered were the contradicting opinions."* My response to concerns here are to spend more time teaching how to locate reliable sources and then synthesizing diverse opinions on a topic. Changes for fall 2015 include students sharing and determining which resources are reliable.

Presentation

The professional presentation of the project varies. To help students prepare their project for presentation during fall 2015 I will have peer reviews of the final product step. The students seem to prefer the poster session model: *"I enjoyed the way we presented the projects walking around the room verse standing in front of the class presenting."*

Reflection Paper

Students reported on the challenges encountered in their reflection papers, which indicate possible areas to change. Some issues were assignment related and others were obstacles such as time and procrastination. Many students wished they had spent more time researching and find balancing school, work, and family responsibilities difficult. For some the hardest part was picking a topic: *"When this project is assigned in the future it might be helpful for you to directly warn students that this is a very time consuming project. I under estimated the amount of time the different steps in the project take. I wish that I had a clearer vision of how it was all being pieced together in the beginning."* Now when introducing the assignment, I stress the time needed to complete and created YouTube videos to show how each component builds into the final project.

When comparing the original assignment packet to the current packet the assignment has more detailed and complete rubrics to assess each component of the assignment, and the written directions are more explicit. Below is an example of how one component of the assignment has evolved. This example illustrates the type of changes made throughout the document. Most of the questions remain the same; unreferenced pronouns are now more clearly explained as well as offering a rubric and not specifying the page count, as students often needed more pages to fully reflect. I compared the assignment I distributed in October 2012 (6 pages and 1115 words) to the document used in March 2015 (13 pages and 3513 words).

Fall 2012 Reflection Paper Expectations	Spring 2015 Reflection Paper Expectations
Write a 2-3 page paper to explain:	Write a paper to explain:
1. What is your understanding of language diversity and cultural awareness?	
2. How will this experience help your career as an educator?	How will the family project help your career as an educator?
3. How did you apply learning theories, readings, and course content?	
4. How does the environment and play support literacy learning?	Explain what you learned about how the environment and play support literacy learning?
5. What challenges did you encounter?	
6. What do you wish you had spent more time on or done differently?	
7. What part of the project did you do your best work on?	
8. What was the most enjoyable part of this project?	
9. What was the least enjoyable part of this project?	
10. How could I change this project to make it better next time?	How could Professor Eliason change this assignment to make it better next time?
11. What is the most important thing you learned in this project?	
No rubric for assignment	Assignment includes a rubric.

The learning described demonstrates students met the intended learning outcomes of the assignment for accreditation purposes. Students summarized their new learning as:

- *This project opened my eyes to the many community resources available to children and families and ways to promote learning at little to no cost.*
- *Families need information and don't always know where to get it. I can be resource in helping them.*
- *How important it is to have a relationship with families.*
- *Provide activities for families so they can make their home into a positive environment to advance children's development and growth*
- *Never assume any two families are alike.*

Conclusion

The process of using feedback from students made me revise my role of instructor. I increased my ability to be open to constructive feedback, respond to questions from students during in class work time, and to revise and improve printed materials to scaffold learning. I realized that effective teaching is more about listening than talking. I believe the role of students has changed as well as seen in the time spent working in class co-creating the project when students use peers to answer questions. The time also seems to result in a positive emotional climate of trust and respect, which allows me to support and observe the growth of individuals. Balancing power with students and critical self-reflection improves my teaching as well as modeling techniques I hope to observe students in future semesters using with children in their practica.

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