Sarah Jackson, M.Ed.

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Introduction

Sarah and I had the opportunity to co-teach two different sessions during the spring semester of 2007. During the sessions we observed each other teaching with the intent of providing each other with pertinent feedback in order to improve our teaching skills. The session I critiqued below included a presentation and activity that Sarah engaged her graduate level students in surrounding the use of evidence-based practices.

Teacher

Sarah’s perspective toward education is grounded in adult learning principles. Sarah implements principles of universal design but admittedly would like to learn how to use it more effectively. Sarah takes pride in considering the characteristics of adult learning and making information practical and relevant for her students. It was evident through the syllabus, class documents, and conversation that Sarah keeps the needs of the learners in consideration when preparing for class. Her syllabus reflects the use of multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression; the class documents are clearly prepared and incorporate effective adult learning strategies; and during our conversation, Sarah clearly stated that while using an informal approach to classroom interactions, her students are expected to be self-directed and reflective.

During the session I observed Sarah’s teaching, she exhibited a consideration for the needs of the learners through the use of small group work where the students engaged in reflective conversations regarding their last assignment. Students were encouraged to discuss the challenges and successes of their last assignment and share their findings with Sarah.
Sarah felt her educational philosophy, theories and beliefs were exhibited during the session I observed her because she made the information relevant for the students. She felt there was a clear connection between the activities, the information, and the relevancy for the students’ professional careers.

*Student*

Sarah believes there are a variety of learning styles represented in any classroom, which is why she incorporates varied learning experiences and effective strategies for adult learning. The session I observed Sarah teaching was a small class composed of six students. Even in a small class there is room for variability of learning styles. Some students were quick to answer questions, while others seemed to internalize information privately. The students seemed to be concerned about their success in the class, enjoyed having Sarah as a teacher, and felt challenged by the material. Sarah met the needs of the learners by providing them with a safe environment to share their experiences, presenting material that was applicable to their professional roles, and keeping in mind the characteristics of adult learners.

Sarah believes that the learning styles were addressed in her teaching session because she could tell through their reflective journals that they had met the learning objectives. She also believes the students were engaged during the session because they had rich discussions that were relevant to the focus of the topic.

*Content*

In the development of the syllabus and course content, Sarah reflected on the place of the course within the curriculum of the program and the traditions of the field. These considerations are reflected in the course content outline in the syllabus. The content is clearly aligned with the early childhood intervention specialist (ECIS) program competencies and evidence-based
practices, legal mandates, best practices, and current topics and trends used in the field of early childhood intervention. The course content is functional for early childhood professionals, integrating support for challenging aspects of the field. During the session I observed, Sarah implemented innovative information regarding evidence-based practices and provided students with practical applications for integrating the information in their professional lives.

Sarah felt the session was a reflection of the course within the curriculum of the ECIS program and traditions of the field because the information was relevant to what the students are currently facing and/or will need to know when they leave the program.

Mode

The course syllabus outlines the teaching/learning strategies that will be used in the class. Sarah made it clear to the students in her syllabus that class sessions would involve problem-based learning activities, cooperative learning group activities, demonstrations, lectures, panel discussions, time for group and individual reflection, and lectures supported by PowerPoint. Sarah incorporates a variety of teaching/learning strategies to support the needs of adult learners with different learning styles. Students are encouraged to use self-reflection and evaluation, creative thinking, problem solving, and collaborative team-work to achieve the intended outcomes of the course.

During the session I observed, Sarah used time for group and individual reflection, and cooperative learning groups to support the students’ evaluation of a previously completed online learning activity. Individual and group conversations were used as a way to facilitate a shared understanding of the challenges and successes of the online activity and the overall use of technology for cooperative learning activities. Using individual and group strategies, students were engaged in a reflective process highlighted as one of the goals for the course.
Sarah then used lecture supported by PowerPoint to demonstrate a practitioner approach to consistently and effectively utilizing evidence-based practices. Lecture was used briefly as a way to disseminate new and imperative information for the students. The ability of practitioners to utilize evidence-based practices is integral to both the early childhood intervention specialist program and the field of early intervention at large.

Sarah felt the modes she used were successful approaches during the session. She felt the session went really well because the students had rich discussions and were able to meet her objectives for the class including thinking skills about evidence-based practices.

Environment

The physical environment of the classroom in which Sarah was teaching was conducive to small and large group discussions, activities, and presentations. The room was equipped with audio-visual equipment and technology useful for integrating various modes of teaching/learning. Sarah utilized this technology during her class sessions, integrating the use of visual supports and hands-on learning. While little needs to/can be done to modify the physical space, Sarah encourages her students to sit and/or work where they are most comfortable and considers their needs by implementing breaks and flexibility in her lessons. The class session ran from 7pm to 10pm on a week night, leading to a rather tired group of students. In our conversations, Sarah shared her awareness of the late hour of the class and tied that to her evaluation of student participation. Sarah is clearly attentive to the needs of her students, maintaining awareness of their level of engagement.

Sarah feels the physical environment affects the teaching and learning in the classroom because the group is so small. She thinks that sometimes the room is too big and students lose
engagement and their interactions are limited. Sarah pointed out that students sit in the same seat all semester and lose out on differing viewpoints and interactions with other students.

*Style*

Sarah describes her teaching style as informal. She strives to create a safe learning environment where students are comfortable sharing ideas, asking questions, problem solving with others, and engaging in reflective practices. Sarah feels she has developed this style because it is most conducive to what research shows us about adult learning and effective professional development.

I observed Sarah engaging in a whole group discussion with her students. She actively promoted a positive emotional climate by using non-verbal affirmations such as smiling and head-nodding, and consistently accepted any and all ideas as valuable. Sarah’s passion for the teaching/learning process was evident during this discussion as she generated new ideas and questions during the discussion. The students clearly felt safe sharing their opinions and viewpoints with Sarah and each other as everyone participated voluntarily.

Sarah feels the students in her class feel safe and explained that a relationship built on trust is developed over time between herself and her students.

*Assessment*

Sarah develops her assessments by considering the goals of the course, and aligning them to the assignments. Weekly reflections allow Sarah to use progress monitoring on the students ability to meet the course objectives. The reflections inform Sarah’s teaching. Sarah uses the assessment results to decide whether to stay on one topic or move to something else. Sarah acknowledges that course assignments are harder to revisit than weekly journals, but she provides feedback to help students move closer toward the course expectations. The assessment
is tied to the overall goals of the program because it highlights the policies the program has identified for the course.

The content Sarah presented when I observed her teaching was directly tied to the overall goals and objectives of the course. The use of technology, reflective practices, and evidence-based practices are clearly incorporated in the class. Students are assessed on their participation in class activities, on-line activities, and reflective practices. It is evident from the syllabus and observations that Sarah has high expectations for her students.

**Strengths**

Sarah has much strength as an instructor. She consistently treats her students with respect and uses eloquently spoken professional language. Every time I have had the opportunity to observe Sarah teaching, she has tied examples and frequently asked questions to her lectures to help clarify information for students. Sarah’s use of elements of multiple means of representation and engagement are emerging and she effectively addresses characteristics of adult learners. Sarah is always well prepared and she knows her material well enough to present without the use of lecture notes. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Sarah is flexible and can adjust a learning situation to meet the needs of her students.

**Improvement**

Program competencies, course description, and course expectations are outlined in the syllabus for Sarah’s class. I would suggest that Sarah add clearly defined learning goals/objectives to her syllabus in order to help herself and the student assess their progress toward them. A grading policy is outlined in Sarah’s syllabus. I would suggest that she add more specific grading rules such as rubrics and/or checklists to help the students ensure they are meeting the guidelines for assessment.
Sarah is obviously a seasoned presenter with an above average ability to convey new information. Small changes might improve Sarah’s ability to engage students during her presentations. I would suggest that Sarah beware of nervous foot shifting while she is talking because it can be distracting to the audience. Sarah might try moving about the room and using more hand gestures to hold students attention. Sarah is always prepared and knows her material well enough not to use lecture notes and therefore tends to look back at the screen to prompt her discussion. I would suggest Sarah use brief notes in front of her to prompt her discussion so she can avoid talking to the screen rather than the audience. I would also suggest that Sarah remember to relax and know that if she makes a mistake it will not be detrimental. She and her audience will both learn from mistakes.

In order to facilitate more versatile classroom discussion and interactions I would suggest that Sarah consider implementing flexible grouping strategies for classroom activities. Having students sit in different seats each week might also help the students develop relationships with a more diverse group of colleagues. Sarah mentioned that she is making an effort to provide students with more examples during her lectures to represent the ideas she is conveying. While I think Sarah does a nice job providing examples and inserting frequently asked questions, I might suggest she use a hands-on approach to helping students apply new information. For example, when teaching students about evaluating the quality of published research Sarah could provide the students with examples of poor and high quality research and have them work in groups to determine the quality indicators of each.

Holding students accountable for work outside the classroom might help Sarah use time more effectively. When students are held accountable for class preparation, they are more likely to prepare more extensively, and Sarah could spend less in class time conveying the new content
she needs to cover each week and more time on activities applying the content. The reflective journals Sarah has implemented could be used as an outlet for determining the amount of time students spend preparing for class.

Sarah mentioned that she is looking for ways to improve her use of a universal design for learning. I think Sarah has made a great start to providing her students with multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression while consistently considering the needs of adult learners. I would suggest that Sarah keep in mind principles of adult learning, flexible grouping, differentiated instruction, universal design, and instructional strategies other than lecture when preparing her lessons. Perhaps trying something new each week would add to Sarah’s repertoire of teaching strategies and help her to feel more effective at meeting the needs of diverse learners.