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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 69 (2012) 1443 – 1451

Procedia

Social and Behavioral Sciences

International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology (ICEEPSY 2012)

Learning Circus skills in a day care centre: Student teachers in a cooperative, integrative arts education project

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Abstract

The article is a qualitative case study of the integrative arts educational learning process of 11 teacher students during one study project in which they created an integrative and interactive educational project for 1- to 7-year-old day care centre children. The theme of the project was Circus. The qualitative research methods used include analyses, descriptions of observations, discussions with the students, and content analyses of students' reflective and evaluative writings about the creative learning process. The results show that the cooperative learning method fits very well into integrative and expressive education studies.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Dr. Zafer Bekirogullari of Cognitive – Counselling, Research & Conference Services C-cracs.

Keywords: early childhood education; integrative arts education; teacher education; cooperative learning process

1. Introduction

This article is a qualitative case study of an integrative learning process of 11 students of the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Helsinki who were studying their optional minor subjects in arts and skills education (25 cr.) during the study year 2011-12. The aim of their production was to create an integrative and interactive expressive educational project for the day care centre children. The University students chose the Circus theme for the project because it integrates in a natural way all areas in arts and skills education.

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This arts educational project concerned early childhood education in which arts educational ideas are presented as shown in The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care (NCGECEC, 2005) and the Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education (2000). These guidelines are also included in “Arts education for early childhood education” (Ruokonen, Rusanen & Välimäki, 2009), which aims to develop practices and deepen ideas concerning the arts education presented in the National Curriculum Guidelines. Every day care centre in Finland must produce its unit-specific curriculum based on the national curriculum. The NCGECEC introduces arts education and artistic activities as part of a holistic aesthetic orientation toward early childhood education. According to Rusanen & Ruokonen (2010), Finnish early childhood arts educational guidelines promote children’s identity as active agents and pay attention to holistic development through the arts. Learning environment issues should also be taken into account and the activities should be accessible to the children. Teachers should understand and interpret the challenges and developmental phases of a child between one and seven years. Individual sessions as well as group and peer group activities are emphasized. These aspects and the child-centred views that have been common in Finnish early childhood education since the 1970s are focused on with the objective of contributing to the development of a competent child (Onnismäa, 2010, 48-51).

2. Theoretical framework

The learning process was approached through Dewey’s (1934/2005) and then Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory, and finally with Hakkarainen’s (1993) and Soininen’s (1995) models of learning. According to Kolb (1984, 40-42), knowledge is created from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it. Kolb and Kolb (2005) present principles for the enhancement of experiential learning in higher education and suggest how experiential learning can be applied throughout the educational environment by institutional development programs, including longitudinal outcome assessment curriculum development, student development and faculty development. According to their research, some educational principles from Dewey’s (1938) educational philosophy are essential in experiential learning in higher education: firstly, maintaining respect for learners and their experiences, secondly, beginning learning with the learner’s experience of the subject matter, and finally, creating a hospitable space for learning. Human beings naturally make meaning from their experiences through conversation, so there must be space for conversation and reflection. There must be space for feeling and thinking and for the development of expertise (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Many university students enter teacher education conditioned by their previous educational experiences to be passive recipients of what they have been taught. It is essential to make space for students’ responsibility for their learning process and ability to learn from their experiences.

Sava (1993, 1998) has used Kolb’s theory to describe the artistic learning process, where mental and material artistic tools are transformed into concrete experiences and reflective thinking and aesthetic-artistic conceptualisations into artistic action. According to Soininen (1995), a teacher’s role in educational interaction is not to be the one who is sharing knowledge; rather, a teacher should be a mentor and support the learning process in which students themselves have the responsibility for their learning. According to this model, there is a new dialogue between the teacher and the students in the learning process when seeking information and sharing new ideas. Soininen (1995) describes this learning process with the phases of intention, instruction, interaction and innovation. In this learning process, the teacher’s ability to co-operate and share his/her previous experience and knowledge of the process in the right way without exercising the traditional teacher’s authority is essential to develop a creative learning process in a group (Hakkarainen, 1993,480; Soininen, 1995,171).

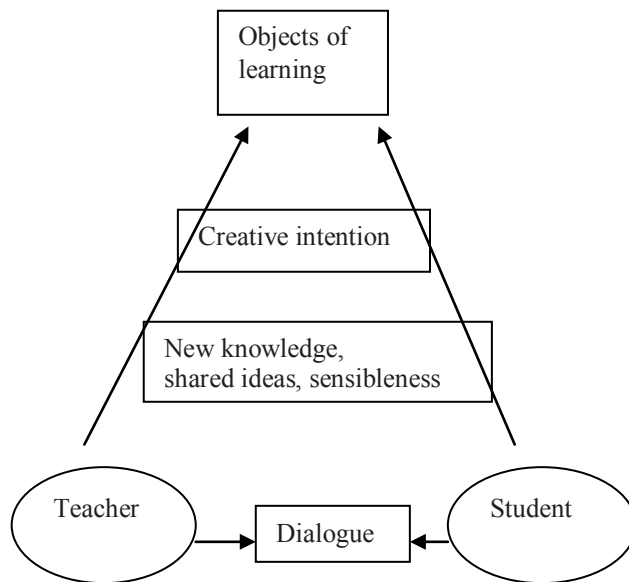


Fig.1. Role of a teacher and a learner in a new learning situation (Hakkarainen, 1993, 480)

For the teacher student's professional development, this co-operative learning and the teacher's role as a mentor are important aspects of the interaction. The mentor process is an interactive relationship in which sincerity, trust, and commitments are present (Oksanen, 2000, 237). According to Antikainen (2005, 237), dialogue and co-operation with supportive encouragement are essential to the learning process.

In Ruismäki's (1998, 41) estimation, an integrative and holistic learning process that combines music with the other arts not only strengthens the learning process of the students but also gives experiences and, most importantly joy to the participating students. Csikszentmihalyi (1991, 4-5) also describes the concept of 'flow', (which is an essential form of play and, I think a part of a successful holistic and integrative learning process) as a very holistic and dynamic experience, and a stage without stress about the process. In Ruismäki's (1998, 32) opinion, the enjoyment and joy of the learning process is derived from the experiences in which the learners' knowledge and skills increase and his/her self-esteem develops from managing to do things to doing them well. One of the results from the research on pre-school children participating in the integrative music education programme was that the most meaningful experience for the children in their integrated artistic activity was the experience of pleasure, delight and joy (Ruokonen, 1997, 157).

Cooperative learning is a student-centred and non-competitive approach to learning. Moreover, the teacher plays the role of facilitator or mentor in a student-centred learning process. Such learning requires positive interdependent, individual accountability, appropriate group processing and social skills (Millis & Cottell, 1998, 15-17). In Sahlberg's and Leppilampi's (1994, 89) estimation, in a cooperative learning process the common learning (knowledge and skills) is combined with personal, social and cultural development. Many group members had studied the principles of cooperative learning and hoped to use

this approach during the study week. My role was to be a researcher and a teacher at the same time. In the teacher's role, I aimed, as Krim (1988, 160-162) describes, "to learn to de-authorize myself". Using various research methods, I combined participant observation with an analysis of the group members' individual reflective writings about their learning processes.

3. Study design

The aim of this qualitative case study was to research the integrative arts educational learning process of 11 students in their arts educational studies during one study project, in which they created an integrative and interactive educational project for the children in a day care centre. The students of an arts educational group worked according to cooperative learning methods where instruction and learning were combined in the same co-operative learning process and developed based on a common intention, and common experiences of the theme. The teacher assumed the role of a mentor and researcher. The research methods used here included analyses and descriptions of observations, discussions with the students, and content analyses of student's reflective and evaluative writings about their creative learning processes.

The data was gathered from e-mail and facebook-environment. Students chose as their reflective learning environment the closed group in facebook because they thought it is the most-used platform for their discussions. They also chose the theme, 'Circus', because it included all areas of arts and skills education. In the qualitative content analysis, the data was theory-based, using Soininen's 1995 model, and classified and analysed. The results were also reflectively discussed with the participants and the evaluation and feedback from day care children was gathered for the common discussion.

4. Results

The aim of this case study was to discover new, integrative, educational ways for children to learn arts and skills in early childhood education and to describe the learning the students had during this study project. When examining the students' reflective writing of their learning processes, it was found that all of the participants reported that their intention had been for them to learn about the integrative and expressive artistic working process. They made such statements as, "*I would like to learn how to integrate music with another expressive art form like circus skills or mimes*" or "*I would like us to create the holistic presentation in an expressive and joyful way*".

Secondly, they wanted to learn to work in a group cooperatively. The description and analysis of their group discussion notes and reflective writings encouraged to use cooperative learning methods. One student wrote: "*I think the use of cooperative learning and the facebook environment during this study process was more successful than all the others before it*". Students said that the cooperative way of learning first helped them to begin the work. The group began to work very effectively; they created an overall plan and structure, and they chose their roles, divided themselves into smaller groups, and shared their responsibilities all at the very first meeting. According to my observations and discussions with the students, they had learned how to work well together; their attitude toward the common aim was shared and the rules were decided upon together.

The facebook learning environment and co-operative group work helped the students to share information, experiences, knowledge, and theories. The practices of the circus theme as well as their working methods when creating the project were also framed in the facebook environment. Students described how they learned to work together and listen to one other: "*. . . at the same time as we were listening to the others, we found the solution to our problem with the stage decor so that children could paint it themselves*". One student designed the Tintamaresk (dialogue between two heads) of the Circus theme for the children's play and photography. Students also wrote about the experiences that they had

acquired from learning in quite a personal way, and they described their positive feelings about being respected, being given responsibilities, and succeeding in their roles or duties: “. . . *I learned to be open, and I think that the successful presentation of my role did a lot of good for my self-esteem . . .*”. The positive and open atmosphere was very valuable to the group members, particularly when they had been planning and creating an integrative, expressive and interactive performance for the children. One student reported, “*The main aim is to have children actively involved with this process, so let’s start from a story in which circus people need help to prepare their circus performance*”.

The third area of interest in the students’ intentions in the learning process was the intention to create an aesthetic experience: “. . . *my intention is to create an enjoyable artistic experience for the children*”. The fourth area of intention was the intention to increase knowledge of the Circus in a proper way for small children. The workshops introduced juggling, mime, acrobatic play, clowns and visual artists.

The feeling of inspiration is valuable if it occurs at the beginning of the process, as it should. All students reported that their inspiration for the Circus theme began at the very first meeting: “*We came up with great ideas at the first meeting and that inspired me to study more about the Circus . . .*”. All students described their feelings of inspiration during the entire learning process; they described moments of inspiration and situations when the inspiration came. I call these the moments of good ideas and passion: “. . . *suddenly, when I looked at my partner, I realised that we were inspired by each other as clowns and the improvisation we began flowed*” or “*I was inspired again by a child who was looking at me . . .*”. More than half of the group members mentioned that the good and positive atmosphere and interaction within the group inspired them to work and learn: “*I was inspired when I realised that the others were listening to me and respected my thoughts and from this realisation I found more depth for my role in this project*”.

The moments of intuition about the learning process are mainly connected to the moments of individual reflection during rehearsal or when writing a manuscript. A student might suddenly sense the role in a drama: “. . . *while I was an animal trainer, I suddenly had an intuition of a certain way of motivating children’s motor skills; they don’t like to wake up during the daytime, so they have to move in the dark in different ways . . .*”.

Music was also part of the students’ learning. One student explained that the role of music was important for the sense of intuition: “. . . *while I was listening to music, I started to dance and I had many images in my mind of being in a circus*”. The moments of intuitions were also connected to the conceptualisation of the experience after reflective discussion with the director (one of the students) and partners of the smaller workshop group.

The stage workers also described moments of intuition concerning colours and shapes when working with the children “*suddenly they started to make yellow circles or suns at the same time*”.

According to students’ descriptions, the use of imagination was fundamental to the entire process. Improvisation and problem solving were connected to active experimentation. The moments of improvisation were very spontaneous and occurred during the interactive presentations: “*I began to improvise at the moment when the shyest child was in front of me*”. Improvisation is often connected to the dance portions of the presentation. The students had four workshops for each of the different groups of children. For the beginning, they planned the multisensory workshop for the smallest children from one to three years old. In this workshop, music, colours, balloons and all kinds of circus elements had a great role in the interaction with the children. They also explained that the moments of improvisation came differently in the presentations; they used a variety ways to improvise and solve problems on the spot. Interactive presentations with children are very lively and different each time because the children are part of the circus adventure.

The main inventions in this learning process were connected to the integrative approach in expressive arts education: “. . . *I somehow found music in a different and more holistic way again when I was*

learning to combine it with the other arts and drama . . . ” or “I learned practically the concept of integration . . . ” or “I learned to notice how small things are very expressive such as music and light, when they are combined”. Students also described their inventions in connection with the interactive adventure and those fantasies and make-believe experiences they had in their contact with the children.

Most of the students thought that the most meaningful part of this learning process was the opportunity to create the artistic work and fulfil their fantasies through it. They described this process as very enjoyable and passionate: *“It was a wonderful feeling to see how my ideas were realised . . . ” or “I enjoyed finding out for certain that I can write the open manuscript for the drama so that there is space for our improvisation . . . ”.* Another student noted: *“. . . together we had so much fun and at the same time we were working so hard and learning so much that it was hard to believe . . . ”.*

Although students were very pleased with their successes, they did have some criticisms of the process. Students mostly criticised the lack of the time to work more with the other groups participating in the same project: *“. . . we had such a good start and cooperation in our group that we didn’t pay enough attention to cooperation with the other groups (five other groups)”.* The personal timetables were sometimes problematic; students had difficulty finding time to work together independently: *“. . . the whole manuscript worked well and the circus director was like an artistic conductor of the whole process”.*

When the students analysed the integration of the different arts in their interactive presentation they realised, that the main combination existed between music especially in the 1-3 year olds’ multisensory workshop and circus presentation parts when the entire group was presenting together. Music was also connected to visual arts, dance and skills, juggling, clowns, mime and stage arts. The expressive activity was integrated between music, drama (mimes, clowns) and dance (animals). With these elements, the students had carried out the interactive circus adventure with the children. The students also analysed the role of music education in integrative art education, and they described it as essential. All activities of music education (listening, singing, dancing and playing) were in the performance and they were also very well combined with the other art forms of expressive education.

Students’ descriptions of observing the children in their interactive session show that children actively participated in drama activities including mime, felling expressions with the clowns, juggling skills, and dancing. They were also very active in fantasising being animals, playing circus, listening to and making music, decorating and painting the circus stage, making comments, and participating in the process. The children’s interaction, participation and concentration were good in all the workshops. Students enjoyed the fact that they had created the circus adventure world where children’s fantasies of the circus came to life in a day care centre and where they followed the circus story in a very intensive way. According to the students, the reflective manner of working helped them to create better ideas and a better performance. Everyone in the groups was continuously involved with solving problems, reflecting ideas, passionately working and having fun together.

5. Discussion

The conclusions of this action research are encouraging with regard to using both the cooperative learning method and experiential learning theory. The students’ learning experiences closely followed Soinen’s (1993) model. Students reported experiences of intention, inspiration, intuition, imagination, improvisation and invention throughout their learning. They also simultaneously experienced planning, discussing, writing, practising, and reflecting on their skills; the artistic performance was part of the interactive session itself.

At first, there was the intention to create an interactive session for children. According to the students’ writings, both unique and shared experiences of the circus motivated them in their intention, and their

experiences gave them inspiration and intuition to create the learning experience for the students. According to student writings about the process, they used much imagination in all of the learning situations while improvisation was more important in the interactive session.

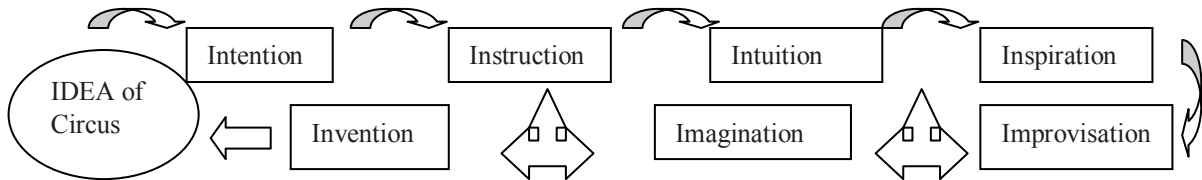


Fig. 2. In the circle of the creative learning process

The most meaningful invention they made was connected to aesthetic issues like creating roles or atmosphere with circus roles, music, movement, drama, visual arts and colours. Working cooperatively was also reported as being a very meaningful way of learning to share information, knowledge and methods. By using the cooperative method, students reported that they learned to work together, to listen to and respect others and themselves; they felt that their self-esteem and self-expression in aesthetic work increased significantly in the reflective group. The process was very intense and many times the creative work could be stressful, usually at the beginning of the project or before a performance. Students did not report any stressful or negative feelings. As I followed the learning session, the experiential, cooperative and reflective way of working helped them. They succeeded in creating an inspiring and encouraging team in an open and supportive atmosphere. The feelings reported and observed were connected to the enjoyment of creating something new by using the imagination or the passion to create something ‘good, aesthetically valuable and functionally fun for children. The role of reflection was essential in every learning situation.

I had two roles during this study: teacher/mentor and researcher. The students analysed my role as a teacher as *“a positive supporter and encouraging mentor”*. I learned to be more of a mentor and I learned about facebook as a learning environment. It was wonderful to participate and observe how creatively a group of students can work and learn together. When I think of myself as a researcher, I reflect that during the process I collected material in many ways and encouraged students to reflect individually and in groups and to write about their learning processes. After the session, my task was to analyse and classify the collected material. I have to admit that my words are not enough to describe the wholeness of this cooperative, experiential and active learning process, where integrated forms of arts played the main role, and the most important actions that happened were often nonverbal events and internal and personal feelings like the joy and passion students felt from creative work and interaction. At the end of this project we could share the thoughts of Dewey (1948) about how creativity is growing through shared and individual experiences in artistic activities.

The first of the principles to which I would call attention is the emphasis upon individuality as the creative factor in life’s experiences. An immense amount has been said and written about the individual and about individuality. Too much of it, however, is vitiated by setting up what these words stand for as if it were something complete in itself and in isolation. Here, it is seen and consistently treated as the life factor that varies from a previously given order, and

that in varying transforms in some measure that from which it departs, even in the very act of receiving and using it. This creativity is meaning of artistic activity - which is manifested not just in what are regarded as the fine arts, but in all forms of life that are not tied down to what is established by custom and convention. In re-creating them in its own way it brings refreshment, growth, and satisfying joy to one who participates. (Dewey, J. 1948)

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