

Second Chance: If at First You Do Not Succeed, Set up a Plan and Try, Try Again

John Poulsen

University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Canada

Student teachers make errors in their practicum. Then they learn and fix those errors. This is the standard arc within a successful practicum. Some students make errors that they do not fix and then make more errors that again remain unfixed. This downward spiral increases in pace until the classroom becomes chaos. These students at the University of Lethbridge require a focused and planned second attempt at student teaching. This paper will examine the reasons why the “second chance” students were not successful in their first attempt, and then it will outline an initiative that has increased the chances of success. The program has four sections, each of which seems to be important in increasing the capabilities of the student teacher. The four components are as follows: (1) reflection; (2) identification of problem areas; (3) creation of a plan with timeline; and (4) mentor.

Keywords: student teaching, second chance, practicum, planning

Introduction

This paper will describe an innovative program intended to help students succeed in their second attempt at student teaching. This paper will examine the reasons why the “second chance” students were not successful in their first attempt, and then it will outline an initiative that has increased the chances of success.

A minority of students in the faculty of education program at the University of Lethbridge do not complete the teacher education program in the standard manner. Once a student joins in the faculty of education, they must complete three practica successfully in order to graduate. Ninety percent of our students complete these practica in a sequential manner gaining their bachelor of education and becoming fine teachers. About 10% of the students experience serious problems in their practica. Of these, about half are in danger of failing. That is, approximately one in 20 students experiences difficulties in their student teaching, which are serious enough that they are asked to leave their student teacher placement. Each year approximately 20 students leave our program, some after attempting student teaching again. Approximately 10 students attempt to teach again each year but previous to this initiative, less than 50% are successful.

The students who attempt student teaching for the second time are a source of disquiet for the author who has a belief in the value of education that people can learn and as a teacher, he/she can help people become successful. This innovative program is the result of wanting not to give up on students who are not successful the first time.

The program has four sections, each of which seems to be important in increasing the capabilities of the student teacher. The four components are as follows:

John Poulsen, Ph.D., professor, University of Lethbridge.

- (1) Reflection;
- (2) Identification of problem areas;
- (3) Creation of a plan with timeline;
- (4) Mentor.

Reflection is important to begin and continue with. Often, students in difficulty are unable to accurately “see” their performances. Reflection for these students can often be difficult to begin with. Helping the students understand reflection and gaining the skill of reflection is the first step towards improvement. Reflection allows the student to identify primary problem areas and then ideas of how those problems might be remedied. The third important section is the creation of a plan with a timeline that organizes remediation into bite-sized parts. The final element of a successful remediation plan is gaining a mentor.

Removal From Practicum

Student teachers make errors in their practica. Then they learn and fix those errors. This is the standard arc within a successful practicum. Some students, however, dig themselves into a hole that they cannot extricate themselves from. They make errors that they do not fix and then make more errors that again remain unfixed. This downward spiral increases in pace until the classroom becomes chaos.

Student teachers who make unfixed errors come to a point, whereby they are unable to remedy the situation. Student K indicated that, “In my placement, I struggled with teaching at this level as I felt that I was not truly aware of what students were interested in learning at this age” (Student K, July 2, 2009). At the time, she was unable to define the primary problem with her student teaching and never ascertained what the students were interested in. M2 indicated that he could not find a way to deal with students consistently. “From the beginning, students complained that I was being unfair” (Student M2, April 20, 2010). G suggested that she could not deal with the children’s energy: “At the end of the day, I was exhausted. Then I had to go home and work some more. I did not get any kind of break during the whole time” (Student G, May 13, 2009).

The downward spiral of student teacher ineffectiveness picks up speed and intensity. The university consultant assigned to the student observes more often, gives more suggestions and makes more demands. Sometimes, to the student teacher, the comments coming from the teacher and the university consultant seem to be contradictory. Often, at this point, the principal becomes involved and the student teacher can feel like he/she is buried under an avalanche of suggestions. The student teachers can almost become catatonic in that they know what they need to do (most commonly—create and deliver lesson plans with fair assessment), but they cannot complete the tasks. They start to dread coming to school and will phone in sick. When they are finally asked to leave, the school most are relieved. J suggested that in the end she was, “... Scared of the students and became sick at the thought of going to school” (Student J, March 29, 2009).

Usually, it is the teacher that asks the student teacher to leave. He/she usually cites danger to the children in the class as the reason. Under the lack of leadership by the student teacher, the learning environment crumbles and the teacher becomes fearful that some children are in danger. When asking a student teacher to leave, the teacher often maintains that specific children in his/her class need more structure and control in their learning environment.

Once a student teacher has been asked to leave, then that practicum is finished for the student. The university cannot force a teacher to keep a student teacher. But that does not necessarily mean that this is the

end for the student and they will never become a teacher. Some students are considered as an incomplete grade, and in this way, they will be given a second chance in their practica.

The primary pre-requisite for gaining an incomplete grade is the favorable opinion of the university consultant, who issues the grade and must advocate for the student. He/she must feel that the student has the potential to develop the necessary skills. If this is not in the first practicum, then clear success in the previous practica would bolster the case. Sometimes, the student shows promise in the last few days of the practicum, but the condition in the classroom has devolved to the point where it becomes a case of too little too late.

The student teacher's options at this point have condensed to failing, withdrawing from the course, or gaining an incomplete. In the past, incomplete grades were assigned by the university supervisor with minimal student teacher consultation. Assigning the grade in this way was, in the author's opinion, fraught with problems.

The impetus for assigning an incomplete was not well thought through with little or no consultation with the student. The student was often given the second chance with little or no clear direction. The problem with this was that these students engaged in the same behaviors and were often not successful again. The reason for the second failure is that, in most cases, the student had not changed significantly since their first unsuccessful tries at practicum.

Meeting

The process of remediation begins with a meeting at which the student is informed that they may apply for an incomplete. This is preceded by the unpleasant situation where the student has been ineffective in the classroom. They usually have underperformed and are angry. There is also a sense of loss, as they know that they have presided over the disintegration of a classroom to the point, whereby the classroom teacher was so concerned about the children's safety that he/she asked that the student teacher should be removed.

The students arrive at the author's office, the office of the assistant dean in charge of student programs in a heightened state of emotion. They are often sad, angry, nervous and frightened. Usually, there are four of us at the meeting: the student, the university consultant, the assistant dean in charge of the practicum placements and the author himself. The students sit at the table and the author asks them to explain their sides of the story. They explain as best as they can how they came to be asked to leave the practicum.

Students begin speaking about their situation in an emotional manner. Sometimes, their defensiveness and anger remain for a majority of the meeting, but most students begin to settle as they tell their story. Usually, they state that they did not know that they were in trouble until very recently. They maintain that all they heard were positive comments about what they were doing and that this predicament is unfair. They often lay blame on the teacher associate, the children and their situation.

Most become less defensive, as they realize what they are going to be heard. After their practicum narratives have been unfolded, and then the author and their colleagues begin to ask for clarification. Through questioning, the students usually gain greater insight into how they could have changed this outcome.

Student A described the first 10 minutes of the meeting as "dark", because she indicated that she laid a lot of the blame on external factors. The arc of the meeting allowed her to pinpoint where she could improve. She stated, "At our meeting, I began to realize that I could change" (Student A, May 3, 2009).

At this juncture, the author explains the options available to the student. Should a student successfully apply for an incomplete, they must create a comprehensive plan that addresses their shortcomings as a teacher.

The plan must begin with reflection and include some form of continued reflection. Then there is to be specific suggestions for building their skills, such as readings, observations and volunteering. These readings, observations and/or volunteer situations must be thought through and be connected to a timeline. Finally, each student must seek out a faculty mentor who will serve as a guide.

Students seem genuinely thankful for this meeting. Student H1 offered that she was thankful for the thoughts and frank assessment of her skills and abilities during the meeting. She continued that the discussion of her performance provided areas of improvement and direction on how she could best meet her goals (Student H1, April 28, 2009).

Reflection

It is vital that the students themselves are actively involved in their remediation, and this begins with metacognition (thinking about thinking). The students must examine how they think. It is necessary that they come to an understanding of how they came to their present troubles.

After being removed from the classroom, students have time to cogitate. They have the space needed to reflect on their thinking and practice. They are encouraged to believe that they can improve if they are willing to change, are able to see how they could change and are prepared to put in the work

It is important that the students clarify that their practica were not all bad. They have to see that they have abilities and that with careful husbanding of their resources they can be successful. Without this hope, the next attempt at the practicum will probably also end poorly. However, hope is not all that is needed. Serious improvement is also required and this is based on reflection.

Reflection is important to move beyond a sense that many of these student teachers have that the placement was unfair. There is often a sense that, "if only I had high school, I would have been fine" or "my teacher was mean and unfair and that is why I could not succeed". Through reflection, students come to realize that the only factor that can be changed is himself/herself.

The intent is to put the student teacher on a path that should yield improvement in the areas that have been shown to be weak. G began her reflection with a positive statement suggesting that there were many areas in which she found success during her practicum. She described as her strengths, the development of unit and lesson planning, structuring and organization of lesson activities and, to a lesser degree, the implementation of the lessons. She went on to explain that she had a willingness to learn and grow; a strong work ethic; and a deep and earnest desire to work with children. Her next statement clarified that, "... While I do possess strengths, there were some very real problems that need to be addressed in order to become successful in the classroom" (Student G, April 9, 2009).

Student K indicated that she was unable to pull together the pieces to have a well-rounded and effective practicum round. She felt she had competencies in planning and the collecting of resources for lessons, but lacked the ability to effectively deliver lessons while using a variety of teaching strategies. She continued that she felt that through the process of creating the application for an incomplete, she became aware of the areas that she needed to improve on. "I am requesting an incomplete because with time and my plan, I feel that I would be able to go into the next practicum with the preparation necessary to be an effective teacher" (Student K, September 9, 2009).

Student H1 felt that she was weak in the area of "teacher presence" and that her practicum performance would have been stronger with more confidence in her skills and more experience in the content or subjects she

taught. Her reflection led her to the conclusion that, "... In the past, I had worked with children one on one but that teaching required meeting the needs of a full classroom" (Student H1, May 5, 2009).

Reflection allows the doors of learning to swing open. Student K wrote, "After lengthy reflection on the comments received during the meeting, I agree that there are notable areas of improvement to be worked on and that I am excited to challenge myself" (Student K, September 9, 2009).

Identification of Weaknesses

Each student's remediation plan is different. Within each required plan, elements are expected, but the specifics are up to each individual. Reflection is the first part of the plan. It sets the stage for the specifics of improvement. Most students focus on three areas that they expect to improve. Some of the more common areas of focus on improvement include: classroom management/leadership/student relationships, evaluation and planning/content knowledge.

Management/Leadership/Student Relationships

Classroom management has been a part of every plan created so far. This is not surprising as classroom management requires great skills. Student A suggested that:

... During the course of my practicum, I was often unable to effectively execute the lessons I taught in an effective manner due to various interruptions and behavior issues that occurred in the classroom while I was teaching. However, I set this negative pattern into play on the first day of my practicum by trying too hard to please the students and by not being consistent in my expectations. (Student A, April 5, 2010)

She went on to clarify that to remedy her weakness in management, she would seek a deep and comprehensive understanding of classroom management. Her focus became how to establish solid and meaningful relationships with her students.

The students who were given a second chance all indicated that management of a classroom was complex. They found that being fair and consistent was only one part of the solution. Interpersonal connection and establishing themselves as the leader were also important. Student G saw the need to establish herself as the leader in the classroom. Her plan included, "... Reading and applying the knowledge gained via volunteering" (Student G, May 13, 2009). Student M2 indicated that connecting with the children in his class was a major weakness in his first try, but that in the second attempt he hoped that it would become strength (Student M2, April 20, 2010).

Evaluation

Evaluation and continual assessment of the children's work were often cited as problematic. Varied evaluation and assessment techniques were mentioned as being areas that the second chance students wanted to improve in. Student M1 suggested that, "I used the same evaluation techniques and this impacted the lessons I made. I need to stretch myself in assessment (Student M1, April 6, 2010)". She went on to explain that having a firm grasp of a range of assessment tools was important in lesson planning.

Evaluation, with its connection to student's improvement, was mentioned as being important. Student A stated that:

Students should come to see evaluation as a positive event intended to show the students where they can improve. Not only is it important to have fair assessment practices, but also that the assessment has to be seen as fair by the students. (Student A, May 4, 2009)

Planning/Content Knowledge

Planning was another common area that students saw as needing improvement. They stated that they needed to find a lesson plan structure that would allow them to create lessons effectively. The University of Lethbridge program does not require all students to use the same lesson plan structure, however, it is required that all students find a structure that can work for them. The structure must contain certain elements, such as an objective that has clear connection to the curriculum, detailed description of what will occur in the lesson, closure, assessment of the students learning and self-assessment of the lesson. The specifics of how the lesson plan looks on the page are up to the student. Student A indicated that:

As always, classroom management and planning were the big parts that I have to patch up, and I know this is where I can make my greatest improvement, because I feel that these are the two foundations to everything else listed in the plan. Quality teaching starts at the plan and works up. (Student A, April 17, 2009)

Student K maintained that knowing the students better would allow her to be more successful in management of the class, but it would also give her more insight into what the students were interested in and how she could develop better lessons (Student K, April 6, 2009). She indicated that she needed more ideas of what students in her subject area wanted to do. She stated as part of her plan she needed to visit other teachers: "I need to get out and see what is out there. I want to have a really good sense of what other teachers do is successful" (Student K, April 8, 2009).

Timeline

Each student was required to create a timeline with specific deliverables. This allowed students to break down their growth into attainable parts, a series of short-term goals built to teaching improvement. How the timelines were created and what they contained were dependent on the student. This proved to be very important for some students. The reflection clarified that improvement was needed and indicated what the major areas that needed to be addressed, and the timeline became the vehicle for change. H2 indicated, "I needed to have the timeline, so that I could take the baby steps necessary and get better. I liked being able to look back and see that I have gotten better" (Student H2, October 26, 2009).

Student H1 provided a table that gave, "Specific actions to enhance my overall teaching skills along with a timeframe that will be divided into literature/video studies, teacher observations and supplementary in-class practical teaching under the direction of a recognized mentor" (Student H1, April 30, 2009). The specificity may have been significant in the student H1's growth and success in her second chance.

Following are some examples of the plan with the accompanying timeline. Student G created the following list of books that she would read with the accompanying due dates:

The First Day of School by Harry Wong. Completed with summation by April 14, 2009 (Addresses objectives 1 and 2).

Parents Are Teachers: A Child Management Program by Wesley C. Becker. Completed with summation by April 21, 2009 (Addresses objective 1).

Discipline: Winning at Teaching by Barbara Coloroso. Completed with summation by May 5, 2009 (Addresses objectives 1).

Classroom Management that Works: Research Strategies for Every Teacher by Marzano, Marzano and Pickering. Completed with summation by May 19, 2009 (Addresses objectives 1). (Student G, May 13, 2009)

The above example is important with regards to specificity. The books, the deadlines and which objectives Student G are addressing are clearly laid out. This attention to detail is important in the remediation of all the students. Student H1 created a spreadsheet with description and completion dates to help her stay organized (see Table 1).

Table 1

Work Checklist

Item description	Projected completion date	Actual completion date	Check
High school social studies unit with included assessment plan	May 30, 2009	May 30, 2009	X
Middle school 3D (three dimensional) art unit with included assessment plan	June 5, 2009	June 5, 2009	X
“Managing today’s classrooms” university course	June 22, 2009	June 22, 2009	X
Middle school management plan	July 20, 2009	June 10	X

Note. (H1-May 12, 2009).

The above examples were created over a period of weeks. The students would send drafts to the author, the assistant dean and the author would reply with positive comments and suggestions for improvement. The primary suggestion the author gave was a request for greater clarity. It was important to the author, and eventually the students had a very strong plan that was clearly envisioned. Student K wrote that she appreciated the clarity, “I wanted to say how much I resisted how picky you wanted me to be in my plan. But I can now say that it was important” (Student K, March 2, 2010).

Faculty Mentor

The final factor in the success of the second chance students was the faculty mentor. Each student was required to approach a member of faculty that they believed would be willing to serve as a non-evaluative guide. The evaluation was left to the author, the assistant dean. That is, the author was to determine if the students were meeting the timelines and assignments that the students had set for themselves, and provided that consequences should a student not meet standards. The function of the faculty mentor was to suggest direction, be available for chats and be a support.

It seemed that each dyad had to define what their respective roles would be. Student A stated that after the first meeting with her mentor, she had answered the question, “What is the role of a mentor?”. She continued:

A mentor is someone who will help me, when I ask for help. This person will answer my questions to the best of their abilities, and offer me advice on the issues I bring up, for I am the lead in this process. This will be a routinely kept relationship, where we shall set up meetings and my mentor will be updated on my progress every two weeks. (Student A, April 29, 2010)

Student K was very positive about working with her faculty mentor. She felt she had access to an expert who could personalize learning for her and that:

I have worked with Professor N before and I feel that I can discuss issues and ideas openly with her. Professor N has agreed to mentor me through this process, and I feel that the positive relationship that I have already established with her will help me to grow and develop as a teacher. (Student K, September 9, 2009)

The faculty mentors also spoke highly of this initiative. When asked if the extra work was worthwhile, Professor M, maintained that it was worth to the student. He went on to say that the second chance student he

worked with worked hard and grew as a person. Because his role was supportive and he found that his second chance student was eager to share and keep him apprised as to her progress (Professor M, December 17 2010).

Professor R also spoke highly of the program. She indicated that this was work on her part in which she had to find time in her busy schedule to meet with the student but that overall she was pleased to have been helpful. She indicated that, "... the Faculty of Education cannot just discard students who struggle and that we have an obligation to provide education supports when we can" (Professor R, December 10, 2010).

Both Professors R and M indicated that it was the students who did the majority of the work. The professors may have given suggestions, but the students embraced the second chance and worked hard. Professor C stated that, "The program got the student back into a classroom with someone who could give her/him advice and guidance to guide her/him through to gain confidence" (Professor C, December 10, 2010).

Conclusions

This second chance initiative began as a result of students not being given clear guidelines, when they tried student teaching again. The result of the second chance initiative was very different from previous years when students were not connected to their remediation. In previous years, more than 50% of the students who tried student teaching again did not succeed. There is an old adage that may apply here, "If one fails to plan then one should plan to fail". Students who applied to the second chance initiative became intimately involved in their rehabilitation. They were required to reflect on their challenges with teaching and come up with a very specific plan. This allowed them all to be successful in their second try. That is, of the eight students who applied to the program, all eight succeeded in their second try.

Appendix

Following are the dates of either correspondence or face-to-face meetings with students: A, G, H1, H2, J, K, M1, M2, R, C, M.

Student A

April 5, 2010 email

April 17, 2009 email

April 29, 2010 email

May 3, 2009 meeting

May 4, 2009 email

Student G

April 8, 2009 meeting

April 9, 2009 email

April 13, 2009 email

May 13, 2009 email

Student H1

April 28, 2009 meeting

April 30, 2009 email

May 5, 2009 email

May 12, 2009 email

Student H2

October 26, 2009 email

April 4, 2010 email

Student J

March 29, 2009 meeting

Student K

April 6, 2009 meeting

April 8, 2009 email

July 2, 2009 email

September 9, 2009 email

March 2, 2010 email

Student M1

April 6, 2010

Student M2

April 20, 2010

Professor R

Dec 10, 2010 meeting

Professor C

Dec. 10, 2010 meeting

Professor M

Dec 17, 2010 meeting