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Four Reasons Why Pre-service and Practicing Teachers Should Present at Professional Conferences

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Abstract

During the Fall 2013 semester, two pre-service teachers, one practicing teacher, and a university professor from Peoria, Illinois presented a speed learning session at the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) Annual Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota. After disseminating information about an innovative classroom partnership, attending and presenting at the conference provided an authentic professional experience for the teacher-presenters. In addition to describing the background, travel planning process, and conference experience itself, this article offers four reasons why pre-service and practicing teachers should present at professional conferences: increased confidence and motivation, classroom applications, connections with fellow professionals, and reciprocal support.

Introduction

During the Fall 2012 semester, pre-service teachers enrolled in an advanced language arts instructional methods course at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois participated in a semester-long partnership with a sixth grade class at nearby Roosevelt Magnet School. Five times during the semester, 20 pre-service teachers enrolled in the course visited 28 Roosevelt sixth graders to conduct a mini-unit focused on reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and expository writing. Immediately following each day's instruction, the pre-service teachers led a rotation of fitness stations that engaged the sixth graders in exercises to develop flexibility, aerobics, strength, and balance.

The following April at a college-wide mini-conference, four pre-service teachers from the course presented a poster describing the classroom partnership. The poster presentation allowed the pre-service teachers to “get their feet wet” in terms of presenting at a professional conference. In the meantime, their professor submitted a presentation proposal for a speed learning session (a 20-minute small group presentation and interactive discussion delivered three times in a row) at the 2013 Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) Annual Conference for Middle Level Education, a national conference attended by thousands of education professionals each year.

The power of the proposed speed learning session was the opportunity for participants to hear about the literacy/fitness classroom partnership from the perspective of all parties involved: the university professor (Jana), the sixth grade teacher (Teresa), and two pre-service teachers (Megan and Alyssa). Quotations and anecdotes from some of the sixth grade students were also incorporated. The proposal, which was accepted in July, stated that the presentation would provide a brief overview of the partnership’s structure, engage participants in question-and-answer discussion, and conclude with open-ended discussion of participants’ ideas for initiating informal classroom partnerships in their own communities.



Figure 1. Image of the article’s authors. Figure shows the authors of this article preparing to present at the AMLE conference in Minneapolis.

The conference was held in Minneapolis, Minnesota in November 2013. The speed learning session, entitled “Reading, Writing, and Fitness: A Sixth Grade Classroom Partnership,” was a success, with a total of twelve conference participants attending the three consecutive presentations. In addition to disseminating information about the innovative classroom partnership, presenting at the AMLE Annual Conference – and attending the conference itself – provided an authentic professional experience for Megan, Alyssa, and Teresa, who later identified four reasons why pre-service and practicing teachers should present at professional conferences.

Four Reasons

1. *Increased confidence and motivation.* An evaluation of Project APPLE, one institution’s effort to engage undergraduate teacher education majors in delivering professional presentations, revealed that delivering professional presentations increased pre-service teachers’ confidence as presenters and motivated them to deepen and/or expand their research and dissemination of research (Sanchez, Olson-Pacheco, Grosso, & Hanley, 2008). Following the speed learning session, pre-service teacher Megan wrote, “After presenting at the AMLE Annual Conference, I feel more comfortable speaking in front of a group of peers or colleagues, and I believe this will translate to the classroom setting as well. I have come away from this experience with more notions for teaching as well as more confidence in my abilities.” For Teresa, an experienced teacher, the conference provided a much-appreciated change of pace. She recalled returning from the conference “feeling very excited and empowered.”
2. *Classroom applications.* Pre-service teachers in the Project APPLE evaluation also noted that delivering professional presentations provided opportunities to actively engage in collaborative learning experiences and long-term professional development (Sanchez et al., 2008). Both Megan and Alyssa shared that they returned from the AMLE Annual Conference with a plethora of ideas, strategies, and activities that they hope to incorporate into their future classrooms. Alyssa summarized, “As a pre-service teacher, this opportunity not only prepared me for the realities of the education field, but also made me excited to begin my teaching career.” Even with 16 years of teaching experience, Teresa also returned from the conference with fresh ideas and information, especially in regard to classroom management.
3. *Connections with fellow professionals.* Although conventional wisdom supports the benefits of attending and presenting at professional conferences (Cherrstrom, 2012; Fineday, 2012), one common obstacle is obtaining adequate funding (Nagel, 2013). Cherrstrom (2012) suggests that conference and travel expenses become more palatable when conference-goers make connections during the conference by networking, seeking new knowledge, exchanging ideas, volunteering for upcoming projects, and taking time afterward to reflect and set goals. Opportunities to network and exchange ideas were particularly valued by pre-service teachers Megan and Alyssa. Megan noted, “We received feedback from educators around the country who had a wealth of similar experiences,

suggestions, and ideas to share.” Alyssa added, “I enjoyed being able to participate in conversation with practicing teachers about ways to enhance and support student learning.” Similarly, Teresa noted, “It was very motivating to learn and engage in discussions about new management strategies with various colleagues and presenters from across the nation.”

4. *Reciprocal Support.* Despite many benefits, obtaining permission to attend a professional conference is not always easy. Jana, the university professor who coordinated the trip, learned that it is important to provide a strong rationale for conference attendance early in the planning process. “Having an accepted conference presentation proposal certainly helps!” she noted. “You need to clearly articulate the connection between your organization’s knowledge requirements and the conference program,” explains Doyle (2013, section 3). For the Bradley group, obtaining permission from Teresa’s school district was the greatest challenge. With the idea of reciprocal support in mind, getting permission from the school district was accomplished by providing a detailed travel plan and rationale to Teresa’s building principal soon after school started in August. The principal gladly approved two professional days and secured a substitute teacher to cover Teresa’s classroom during her absence. Upon her return to Peoria, Teresa reciprocated by sharing highlights from the conference with her colleagues at Roosevelt. She recalled, “From Ruby Payne, I shared strategies on how to work with children of poverty. From Noah Salzman, I shared The Teacher Creed. And lastly, I shared some very unconventional behavior management strategies discussed by Jack Berckemeyer.”

Closing Thoughts

Arranging for pre-service and practicing teachers to present at professional conferences requires a great deal of planning, but increased confidence and motivation, classroom applications, connections with fellow professionals, and reciprocal support make it well worth the effort. Planning for the AMLE Annual Conference began six months ahead of time with writing the presentation proposal. Once the proposal was accepted, a student travel grant was written, travel funding and authorization were secured, airline and hotel reservations were made, and conference registrations were purchased. Then, an outline for the speed learning session was drafted, and the co-presenters met three times to finalize and rehearse the presentation.

During the flight home, Teresa commented to Jana, “You just kept moving it forward until we had everything we needed to do it.” Jana responded, “That’s true, but I can see now why this is not something you do every year. It was a lot of work!” However, a few days later, when Jana shared the success of the AMLE speed learning session with a class that had recently completed a similar assignment, one student commented, “I appreciate that we are doing something [in class] that professionals do in the teaching world. It gives us practice in case we ever have the opportunity [to present at a professional conference].”

On second thought, maybe arranging for pre-service and practicing teachers to attend professional conferences IS something we need to do annually. As Megan expounded,

“Going to the AMLE conference wasn’t an opportunity I expected to have during my time at Bradley. But now that I’ve had the real-world experience, I feel inspired. Attending professional conferences (and possibly giving presentations) is something I will definitely look into when I have a classroom of my own!”

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