

MICRO-TEACHING: A TOOL TO ENSURE QUALITY IN TEACHER TRAINING AT A DISTANCE

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Abstract

The word 'micro' denotes a very small portion of a bigger entity. In education domain micro-teaching refers to teaching practice that involves a small number of learners. Quality on the other hand connotes the degree of excellence, something which is up to standard or fits the purpose for which it is meant. In this ever changing competitive global society Higher Education institutions strive to achieve quality in the programmes, courses, qualifications and services offered to their clients. There is some misconception and myth among some people about the quality or standard of teachers trained at a distance. This paper debunks that myth and argues that micro-teaching can be used as a tool to ensure quality of pre-service teachers trained at a distance. The paper reviews relevant literature to support the experiences of the authors and explores the efficacy of micro-teaching in enhancing professional training of teachers through distance education mode. The literature study and the experiences of the authors are validated by a case study on micro-teaching by distance teacher trainee students.

Key words: *micro, teaching, quality, myth, practice, standard.*

Introduction

Teaching is a special skill which is why people who desire to enter the profession need to undergo some systematic training for between 2- 4 years. The need to ensure quality in the training of teachers necessitates some amount of practice by the trainee under the guidance of experienced teachers or trainers. Quality teaching can only be achieved when the teacher is well trained. It is through quality teaching that learning outcomes can be realized. The concept quality, among other things, connotes the degree of excellence, something which is up to the standard or fits the purpose for which it is meant.

The word 'micro' denotes a very small portion of a bigger entity. In education domain micro-teaching refers to the practice of teaching in which a small number of learners are involved. The thinking behind this is that a trainee teacher should be guided to practice with a smaller number which may be gradually increased as his/ her competence increases. Since quality teaching is what can enhance learner performance and achievement every Higher education institution which wants to maintain its name, standard and attracts more students provides programmes that are fit for purpose. Thus in this ever changing competitive global society Higher Education institutions

strive to achieve quality in the programmes, courses, qualifications and services offered to their clients be they delivered at face-to-face or at a distance. Teaching practice, micro-teaching, internship and apprenticeship are some of the terminologies widely used in most African countries to describe experiential component of pre-service teacher training activities. This is done to ensure that people who enter the teaching profession acquire sufficient skills to impart relevant knowledge and skills to learners.

In the African context most people are only used to face to face teaching where residential colleges of education and universities provide teacher training programmes for people who want to become teachers. This narrow view has led to some misconception or myth among some people, even educated folks, about the quality or standard of teachers trained at a distance. This paper debunks that myth and argues that micro-teaching can be used as a tool to ensure quality in the training of pre-service teachers at a distance. The paper reviews relevant literature to support the experiences of the authors and reports a case study on the efficacy of micro-teaching in enhancing professional training of teachers at a distance.

The Rationale for Micro-teaching in Teacher Training at a Distance

With changes in socio-economic and political situations in Africa education is now widely seen as a right for all citizens and one of the tools that can solve most of the socio-economic and political problems in the continent. As a result of this the demand for knowledge and skills has increased. Consequently more schools are being opened and more teachers are required to fill both new and existing vacancies. The high demand for teachers makes it impossible for the traditional mode of training to produce enough teachers for schools. Coupled with this fact is the unique circumstance of prospective teachers. There are those who for socio-economic and political reasons cannot attend face to face residential institutions. This has made the training of teachers at a distance a reality in Africa.

In South Africa in particular the changes in education since 1994 have implications to teaching. The Outcome – Based Education for example requires well trained teachers to implement. For education to produce the desired outcomes classroom teachers and their supervisors need to be trained in both content and methodology of teaching. As indicated by the Association of Teacher Educators (1971), micro-teaching techniques can be used as a tool to train teachers, trainers, supervisors and officials to help them to come to terms with the changes and ensure that the intended outcomes of the changes are achieved.

There is a very serious problem regarding shortage of teachers in South Africa. A recent media reports indicate that there are more than 25000 teaching vacancies in the public schools alone. The problem of teacher shortage has been compounded by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, natural attrition, retirement and change of career. One way to address this problem is for the department of education to recruit, provide incentives and request tertiary institutions such as UNISA to apply distance teacher training strategies to augment the conventional face to face training of teachers.

As a developing country with a 'horrible' past education is the surest vehicle to address the socio-economic problems such as unemployment, poverty, inequality, crime and vulnerability. This is why teachers must be well grounded in both content and how to impart it to learners. Micro-teaching therefore seems to be an important a pre-request for the experiential component of pre-service teacher education programmes. The strategy can ensure that pre-service and in-service teachers get enough practice in a safe and secure environment imposed by the external environment. The need to apply micro-teaching in the training of teachers is informed by the constraints in the external environment such as limited time with students, staff shortages, limited resources and the pressure on teachers to cope with the curriculum demands.

Benton-Kupper (2001) citing Allen and Ryan (1969) argues that micro-teaching is a training concept that can be applied at various pre-service and in-service stages in the professional development of teachers. While some methods of teacher training have come and gone, incorporating microteaching in pre-service teacher education programmes is still alive and strong in the 21st Century (Benton-Kupper, 2001).

Micro-teaching as a strategy to train teachers has been applied in many countries. Parish and

Brown (1998) for example report how certain aspects of micro-teaching has helped Sri Lanka to address the issue of serious shortages of English teachers where unqualified teachers were put in intensive short term programmes and were sent to schools to teach while attending weekend classes. Bell (2007) for instance describes "microteaching" as the common practice of having students in educational method courses "teach" a lesson to their peers in order to gain experience with lesson planning and delivery. Micro-teaching is a system of controlled practice that makes it possible to focus on specific teaching behaviours and practice teaching under controlled conditions. Microteaching, then, is a successful, analytical milieu because of its precision, its simplicity, its low pressures, low threats, the fact that it encourages experimentation, can also be easily replicated and is controllable (Yule et al, 1983). A more modern definition, according to Benton-Kupper (2001), is that micro-teaching is a 'scaled down teaching encounter in which pre-service teachers demonstrate their ability to perform one of several desirable teacher abilities to a group of 3 to 5 peers during a short period.

The definitions above outline what micro-teaching is all about and its aims. It is through micro-teaching that pre-service teachers acquire relevant knowledge, methods and skills for successful experiential teaching.

Historical Development and the Application of Micro Teaching in Pre-service Teacher Preparation

Microteaching has been in existence since the 1960s. It started in 1963 at Stanford University. The first attempt was directed at lessons in liberal arts where students were asked to teach a game to a group of their role-playing peers (Yule, Steyn, Soobia and Davis, 1983). In his view Francis (1997) suggests that micro-teaching should incorporate the broader dimensions of teaching by collaborating with clinical supervision and the development of critical skills applied to teaching. The original model of micro-teaching used by Stanford University was the Behaviour Modification Approach. This has since scaled down teaching practice in video recording and a rating schedule. In their Stanford Teachers' Competence Appraisal Guide McGarvey and Swallow (1986) had, among other things, the following essential components: Stimulus variation, Set induction, Closure, Silence and non-verbal cues, reinforcement of students' participation, Probing questions, illustrating and use of examples, lecturing, planned repetition, and completeness of communication. There have been various adaptations to the original model by various institutions but the core theme remains the same. Micro Lesson Study (MLS) is an aspect of micro-teaching which according to Fernandez and Robinson (2006) is a cooperative learning experience intended to challenge prospective teachers' thinking about teaching and learning, and encourage their connection between theory and practice.

The advent of portable video equipment has contributed to the application of the micro-teaching strategy as an integral part of pre-service teacher training at both face to face and distance education institutions that train teachers.

As in the training of swimmers the neophyte has to be perfect before being allowed in the deep-end of the pool so with the training of teachers. The neophyte teacher has to acquire the skills of teaching step by step through micro-teaching before being exposed to the complex 'macro' class environment (Yule et al., 1983). Micro-teaching should be used before pre-service teachers go out to the schools for a period of between 4-6 weeks practice teaching. The assumption is that constant practice makes perfect. In the training of teachers, be it at a distance or face to face various strategies might be employed over the years. While some strategies and methods have come and gone, incorporating micro-teaching experiences into pre-service teacher education programmes is still strong and alive in the 21 Century (Benton-Kupper, 2001). Micro-teaching is a strategy that can be applied at various pre-service and in-service stages in the professional development of teacher (Allen and Ryan, 1969).

In South Africa, the introduction of Outcomes Based Education (OBE) as a strategy to enhance learning output makes micro-teaching more plausible in training teachers at a distance. Since in distance education lecturers and students separated most of the time the application of micro-teaching may not only bridge both the physical and psychological distance but also provide pre-

service teacher trainees with the opportunity to learn the nitty-gritty of Outcomes-Based Teaching techniques before being sent out to schools to practice. It is therefore imperative that all institutions involved in pre-service teacher preparation consider using micro-teaching approach to train teachers. Butler (2001) argues that since the educational environment continues to be complex, uncertain and faces constraints in the form of limited resources, limited time for students, state mandated requirements and staff shortages teacher education programmes must make optimal use of the limited time and resources available to prepare teacher trainees (students) to function effectively in today's schools. One best way of making use of limited resources in the training of teachers at a distance is through micro-teaching. A well designed and prepared micro-teaching lessons on compact discs (CDs), video and audio materials can be sent out to a small group of students who under the guidance of a tutor can listen to and observe the lessons and take turns in doing their own micro-teaching till they become competent enough to go out for teaching practice.

The application of micro-teaching has not gone unscathed. Citing John-Brooks and Spelman (1973), MaGarvey and Swallow (1986) for instance question whether a complex skill like teaching can be learned by just dividing it into simpler components skills and behaviours and practicing them. They further question as to whether there were justifications on the grounds of research evidence and theoretical framework in deeming selected teaching skills to be particularly important. MaGarvey and Swallow (1986) conclude that the micro-teaching approach focuses more on the separateness of teaching skills than on their combination. Some critics may argue that the teacher is a reflective practitioner and micro-teaching is only a single-skill focus and that the method is obsolete.

Despite the criticisms expressed by some critics and practitioners there are many others who believe that there is still a role for micro-teaching to play to complement the "reflective turn" (Francis, 1997). The improvement in classroom teaching has been a concern the world over and there is the need to improve on existing strategies to make teacher training better. Thus assisting pre-service teachers towards a contemporary view of teaching seems to require new experiences in learning of skills that emphasize discourse in the classroom and requires support from collaborative communities of practice. One effective way of imparting teaching skill to pre-service service teachers is by providing an arena for learning that actively engages them in professional practice. The art of teaching is dynamic and therefore its strategy like Micro-teaching is not static and immune to receiving new ideas. As certain skills, circumstances and the environment of teaching change innovative ideas may be explored and incorporated into existing ones to make teaching more effective instead of "dumping baby away with the bath water".

Micro-teaching provides a secured way of introducing pre-service teachers to teaching before entering the complex teaching environment. It reduces the complexities of the practice teaching situation and provides a gentler introduction to teaching through learning to teach in a safe and controlled environment. Practicing a specific skill in a short lesson with swift feedback provided a very much shortened learning cycle as compared to conventional teaching practice in classrooms. Here student teachers can receive immediate support and feedback from their peers regarding their teaching performance. Apart from microteaching the improvement in teaching skills is cost and time effective than school-based practice (McGarvey and Swallow, 1986). There is evidence that microteaching is reasonably good predictor of success in classroom teaching. Yule et al. (1983) report that a study by Allen and Ryan on student teachers found out that the Experimental Group of 30 who followed a micro-teaching course performed better in the skills of teaching and judged to have greater competences than their fellow counterparts in the Controlled Group who were not part of the programme.. In summing up the benefits of micro-teaching Bell (2007) points out that it is an effective way of helping pre-service teachers learn about and reflect upon effective teaching practice. In addition student teachers themselves find it useful. Amobi (2005) observes that although in its traditional form micro-teaching is used to teach pre-service teachers to master specific skills nowadays its use has expanded to provide them with the complete teaching experience. It orientates them to teach in the natural classroom setting during field experience. The purpose and outcomes of micro-teaching include continuous improvement in teaching and co-operative learning skills.

Apart from pre-service training micro-teaching can be applied in various areas of teacher

improvement programmes such as in-service training of teachers, as a trial framework for team presentation, a method of pre employment prediction, a site for ascertaining the proper instructional level material, and as a means of training supervisors to evaluate beginning teachers The Association of Teacher Educators, 1971).

Training of Educators at a Distance: the UNISA ABET Experience

The Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Institute at UNISA was established in 1995 to train adult educators. Through a well managed student support system the institute has trained over 40,000 adult educators throughout South Africa and beyond Most of the students are employed by the country's provincial departments of education teach at various adult learning centres. The success of the Institute's training programmes depends on its good management and effective student support. Teaching and learning in educational institutions are about the management of central processes (James, 1999).

The management of experiential teaching of the institute's students is unique. All second year Diploma students registered for the Teaching Practice module (ABT202-F) go out for practical teaching at the various adult learning centres nearer to them. The module comprises three sections- a work book, teaching practice and portfolio respectively. Students complete all the sections with supporting evidence and return the project work to the institute by October of the particular year for assessment. The experiential teaching is monitored by tutors who provide students with support in the form of micro- teaching. Students use their course mates as learners during micro-teaching. For example 5-8 students may constitute a class of ABET learners at say level one, two, three or four. The trainee teacher may choose his or her own lesson topic, prepare and teach it while the tutor and two of the 'teacher's' peers sit behind to evaluate the teaching. When the lesson ends the two peers and the tutor would present their observation report to the whole class. Each trainee teacher would take their turns until all the students have taught at least four lessons on different topics. This system of guidance critique and support equips the trainees with skills in teaching before they go out to public adult learning centres to do the teaching practice in real classroom environment. The peers who observe micro-teaching lessons are given an evaluation sheet with 22 items on a scale of 1-5. This is similar to the evaluation forms that are used during teaching practice. The micro-teaching evaluation form is given to the trainee after the lesson. The peer observers point out the strengths and weaknesses of the 'teacher' and provide suggestions for improvement.

Research Methodology

The authors have been tutors for the ABET institute in the North West and Northern Cape provinces since 1996. Part of their responsibilities as tutors is to equip students with the skills for teaching adult learners. The ABET students are mainly senior certificate and matriculation holders who have never taught and now undergoing training as teachers of adults. As pre-service teachers they lack teaching skills hence they are required to register for the compulsory teaching practice module (ABT 202-F) to learn adult teaching methods and skills. The teacher trainees are advised by the institute to choose ABET centres nearer to their homes where they can do practical teaching for one month. At least two of the students' classroom lessons are supervised by tutors or supervisors appointed by the institute.

In February 2007 a tutorial class of 40 second year diploma students taught by the authors was split into two- experimental and control groups respectively. The aim was to find out the effects of micro-teaching on the ABET teacher trainees' teaching performance. This course in the introductory methods in teaching is practical and provides prospective adult teachers with hand-on teaching experiences that engage them in cycles of planning, teaching, reflecting on, and revising lessons (Fernandez and Robinson, 2006). The experimental group was coached in micro-teaching for 5 months' tutorial sessions (February to June 2007). The teacher trainees in the experimental group under the guidance of the authors (tutors) took turns in teaching their peers during tutorials throughout the 5 months' tutorial sessions. Each tutorial session took 4 hours. Thus the teacher

trainees did the micro-teaching sessions for 20 hours. Before the students in the experimental group started with the micro-teaching lessons, the tutors spent time presenting 2 micro-teaching lessons to them. Each student was given sufficient time to prepare lessons on their own chosen topics. Each micro-teaching lesson comprised 5 'learners' and lasted for 30 minutes. During each of the micro-teaching sessions both the two tutors and two peer observers sat in the class during the lesson. Tutors and peer observers would discuss their observational report with the 'teacher' by pointing out the strengths and weaknesses in the particular lesson. Thus there was support and immediate feedback to enable students to improve their teaching. When all the micro-teaching lessons for the day ended there was a general discussion where students talked about their experiences.

Throughout the period of 5 months the control group was kept away from the micro-teaching sessions. The trainees in the control group only attended the general tutorials on module 202-F.

Results of the Experiment

At the end of the 5 month period both the students in the experimental and control groups [40 in number] went out to various adult centres for experiential learning or teaching practice which lasted for a month. The experiential teaching took place in the month of August 2007. The tutors requested two tutors from another tutorial centre to supervise and report on the teaching of the 40 teacher trainees' teaching. They supervised and wrote reports on two lessons presented by each of the 40 teacher trainees. The reports showed a tremendous improvement in the teaching skills of the 20 teacher trainees who participated in the micro-teaching exercises prior to the teaching practice period. They did far better than their course mates who had no experience of micro-teaching.

Discussion of the Experiential Teaching Experiences

When the teaching practice ended the teacher trainees returned to tutorials and one tutorial session of 4 hours was devoted to the discussion of their experiences. Students who did not take part in the micro-teaching reported among other things how they felt as strangers in the classrooms with about 30-35 adult learners. One of them said 'I felt intimidated and started to panic because it was my first experience in teaching'. Another one said 'I used the text book method and ended up doing all the talking throughout the lesson'. One teacher trainee frankly admitted 'I fumbled too much no wonder the supervisor at one point took over the lesson to save me from humiliation. I therefore request our tutors to provide us with the same opportunities otherwise we cannot perform'.

On the other hand the teacher trainees who took part in the micro-teaching sessions were very happy. This group of 20 teacher-trainees reported by sharing their experiences on how they motivated their adult learners with good lesson introductions, use of teaching/learning aids, involved learners in classroom activities, assessed learners and ended lessons by recapping the salient points. One of them remarked, 'At first I dreaded standing in front of many people and to teach them but having gone through micro-teaching sessions I am now well prepared to teach any where'.

Conclusion

This paper argued that micro-teaching can be used as a tool to provide knowledge and skills in teacher training in the context of distance education. The above discussion and the evidence from practice indeed, confirm the positive effect of micro- on pre-service teacher preparation at a distance. This paper has dispelled the myth and misconception among some people that teachers trained at a distance may not be good enough in their classroom practices compared to those trained through the traditional mode. The paper reviewed existing relevant literature on the topic and backed it with the experiences of the authors regarding their use of micro-teaching in training adult educators. The authors conclude that micro-teaching as a tool in teacher preparation is not obsolete and still has an important role in the training of teachers, especially in the context of distance education where there is little contact with students.

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