Lesson Planning for Teacher Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

Well planned lessons enable learners to learn better and to develop better attitudes towards their work. The paper emanates from formal observations of the University of Zimbabwe Graduate Diploma in Education (Grad. D. E.) student teachers on three months teaching practice attachment. Many student teachers were found to be clearly on the path to becoming effective teachers but a sizeable portion, about 20-25%, were thought to be experiencing problems. In their planning of lessons, a wide range and variety of problems were noted. These include lack of real appreciation of the need to plan lessons, lack of the understanding that in order to be effective teachers they had to deploy different pedagogic approaches to meet the learning needs of the subject, inability to address lesson objectives and to match the maturity and social milieu of the learners in their care. Thus it is hoped that this paper may stimulate more interest in educators and student teachers alike beyond these student teachers passing or failing the teaching practice component to preparing really effective practitioners.

Keywords: *Learning objectives; lesson context; lesson planning; pedagogic approaches; student teachers; teaching practice; and teacher effectiveness*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a retrospective study based on analyses of lesson observation transcripts of series of lessons taught by student teachers on the University of Zimbabwe Graduate Diploma in Education programme. This course is a one year postgraduate programme for student teachers who have obtained their first degrees and, in most cases, are already teaching at secondary school level but without any formal teacher preparation. Although the same programme is on offer for science majors, the concern in this paper is on the curriculum arts student teachers as these are taught directly by the curriculum and arts department to which the researcher belongs. Based on their first degrees, student teachers can take up any two teaching subject combinations from English, Ndebele, Shona, History or Religious Studies. Geography occupies middle ground between arts and sciences so it can be combined with any of the five subjects listed above. After three months of lectures in the pedagogies of the various two-subject combinations, the student teachers are placed on a three-month teaching practice stint in different secondary schools in Harare and Chitungwiza as the practical component of the

diploma course. The supervising lecturers are provided with assessment guidelines specific to each of the five subject areas and may observe any student teaching irrespective of the lecturer or the student's subject specialisations. The lecturer's mandate is to observe a student teach, discuss their observations with the student concerned, assess the student's Teaching Practice (TP) file and grade the student's effort for each lesson observed.

2. CONCEPTUALISING THE STUDY

The initial study was based on lesson observation transcripts made on four different University of Zimbabwe Graduate Diploma in Education year- groups (2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007). The second part was based on observation transcripts from the 2012 and 2013 year-groups. The five-year break between the two sets of year groups is a result of inadequate student populations in the period 2008- 2011 largely due to Zimbabwe's economic meltdown. Yet this break enables one to evaluate whether any change in teacher preparation practice has occurred.

Student teachers teach between 12 and 18 periods a week in both subject areas at any level of secondary school. At this stage student teachers are expected to draw up lesson plans for every lesson they teach in both subject areas. The final grade awarded to a student teacher in both subject areas is an aggregate of a minimum of two visits by any of the curriculum and arts lecturers and a minimum of three lesson-supervision transcripts by school-based mentors. This is assumed to be a reasonable assessment of the particular student's teaching ability. Thus the data forming the basis of the present paper is a windfall rather than an overt study of student handling of lesson planning, as a tool for teacher effectiveness .The underlying criteria for judging the success of any given lesson was whether learning was observed to have taken place. The supervising lecturers are always encouraged to be impartial and non-prescriptive so that each lesson is graded on its merit and not some preconceived ideas or models of lesson plans.

3. METHOD

3.1 Approach and Design

The study was qualitative in design to enable a holistic study of the forty-nine student teachers within their natural classroom settings as the direct source of data. According to Nyawaranda (2003), qualitative study does not require a formal research design. The current study was thus structured around flexible, reflexive and recursive processes of observation of the six different year-groups that formed the study's population. The observing lecturer, who was also the key data collection instrument, sought insights into the forty-nine student teachers' development paths into effective teachers-to-be. The

researcher's observations of the student teachers at work yielded transcripts that formed the basis of document analysis as the only data collection tool employed. The descriptive data obtained was used to analyse the emerging patterns observed in the course of teaching practice visits made to the forty-nine student teachers that made up the study sample.

3.2 Population and sampling

In Batch 1 (2004-2007), forty-three student teachers were observed teaching and sixty-six lesson transcripts were written up. Twenty student teachers were observed only once, the remaining twenty-three, twice. Each of the observation transcripts was labelled chronologically by year. Thus, in Batch 1, the first observation transcript was labelled 2004/1 and the last one: 2007/66. Batch 2, (2012-2013), was made up of only six student teachers because this was the period still affected by the effects of a general economic down turn experienced in Zimbabwe. This resulted in severely depressed student numbers. The situation was especially dire in the Faculty of Education where the student population is normally made up of practising teachers who are family people and already have familial responsibilities. The same students are expected to sponsor themselves. From this lot, only two were observed twice so only a total of eight transcripts were available for analysis. The transcripts were labelled from 2012/1 through to 2013/8. Because of a direct paucity of the study population especially for Batch 2, all forty-nine student teachers observed in the two batches were included. For the same reason, the study sample was made up of all the seventy-four lesson transcripts made by the researcher. However where similar observations were made about different student teachers, these were bunched together to avoid unnecessary repetition of the same patterns in discussing findings.

4. RESULTS

The observations were discussed under five considerations that research and experience show as constituting the lesson plan as a tool for teacher effectiveness (Moyana: 1999; Petty, 2004; and Joyce, Calhoun & Hopkins 2002). These are:
1. The purpose and rationale behind lesson planning;
2. Locating a lesson's context;
3. Identifying learning objectives;
4. Selecting appropriate pedagogic approaches; and
5. Structuring a lesson.

4.1 Discussion of observations made on student teachers' lesson plans under the five considerations

(a) The purpose and rationale behind lesson planning

Discussion with the majority of the student teachers observed showed that they accepted that lesson plans are necessary but an onerous part of their day-to-day preparation to teach. In Batch 2, all lessons observed were planned for. However, of the forty-three student teachers observed in Batch 1, eleven of them appeared to place very little value on the task. The worst of them taught for about four weeks without drawing a single plan. The others neglected the task to varying degrees as if to suggest that they were merely going through the motions of studying for a teaching qualification. One of them had pre-training experience of more than ten years. Such neglect of lesson planning, particularly by student teachers on placement is cause for concern and points to either a lack of understanding of the importance of a lesson plan or a blatant disregard of its purpose and rationale.

Discussion with the concerned student teachers showed a worrying trend to blame extraneous factors rather than their lack of commitment. Among some of the excuses offered is involvement with sports or other extra-curricular activities. Another trend noted was that of having several undated lesson plans and these may well have been for display rather than tools for enhancing teacher effectiveness. From this group of eleven, there was general inconsistence so much that one even failed to produce a plan for the lesson he was observed teaching. There were also instances of rehashed lessons as evidenced by the learners' work books and altered dates on the lesson plans.

Whether the student teachers in question lacked supervision by mentors, be they subject teachers, department heads or school administrators, planning a lesson, as with any other design project, has to have a clearly understood purpose and clarity about what tools and materials are available for the project (McBer, 2000; Joyce, et al 2002). This is a task a student teacher has to take all responsibility for. Thus a student teacher who neglects lesson planning misses out on its professional and personal benefits as well as reducing his or her effectiveness as a teacher. Simply put, a lesson plan is about what a teacher wants to achieve, how best it can be achieved, the actual teaching itself and, finally, an evaluation of how successful the learning experience was (Petty 2004).

In the absence of carefully thought out lesson preparation, some student teachers may fail to articulate what problems they may be having with their charges and may be generally unhappy about the way learners respond to learning activities thus making little progress. Successful lesson planning allows the teacher to reflect on what strategies s/he will implement to enable learners to develop requisite skills. Beside failure to appreciate the need to plan lessons, some student teachers failed to locate lessons within the context of the national curriculum, that is, the whole point of a particular lesson.

(b)   Locating a lesson in context

It is important to be able to locate a lesson in the context of the national curriculum, national subject syllabus, school syllabus, and the individual teacher's scheme of work as well as a particular class's ability range. Ideally, the scheme of work should consider the learners' state of knowledge and where possible, their preferred learning styles. Because lessons are not isolated experiences, it is important that they are drawn from the teacher's scheme which in turn ought to grow out of the school's combined subject teachers' decisions of what topics should be tackled at what stage for particular levels. Content subject schemes have unit structures whereas with languages, schemes tend to be a selection of macro- and micro-skills and language functions and structures.

Incomplete schemes often indicate unscheduled lessons. In language teaching for example, such an ad hoc approach may fail to place lessons within their context or cater for the development of all language skills. Of the four language macro skills, namely, reading, writing, speaking and listening, the latter is often ignored as pointed out by Capel, Leask and Turner, (2004); and Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, (1996). Thus lesson plans need to be well-thought out so that the first lesson helps a teacher establish what knowledge learners bring to the lesson or remind the learners what they ought to know about the current topic.

Of the forty- three student teachers in Batch 1, seven showed a variety of problems with their scheming. Incomplete schemes was the most prevalent problem followed by that of schemes that were in place but not really in use as a guide for lesson planning and progress guide. From Batch 2, both 2012/2 and 2013/4 student teachers showed problems with their schemes. Transcript 2012/2 showed that the student teacher did not appear clear about the relationship between a scheme of work and lesson plans, there was duplication of the same material in both documents. On the other hand, transcript 2013/4's broad aims were exactly similar, week after week, thus showing little progression and a sense of the direction the learning and teaching may take in the course of the term.

However, a more worrying trend observed in the first group was that too many student teachers neglected evaluating their schemes. Where they were in place, the evaluative comments were focused on lesson objectives and/or learners' learning behaviours rather than on work coverage that is, what had been and what had not been achieved in the week. Such evaluation leads to better lesson contextualization, after all some lessons may need rescheduling, re-teaching, postponement or a totally justified scrapping off altogether. In Geography, for example, weather conditions may justify minor or major shifts in schemed work and to place such lessons in context, the schemes ought to be evaluated conscientiously.

Closely linked to scheming and also important for teacher effectiveness is the need to consider the learners' state of knowledge. What they bring to a lesson often determines the success of the lesson and should neither be underestimated nor overlooked. Either

way the lesson's effectiveness may be lost. Out of the sixty-six lesson transcript in Batch 1, thirteen clearly had no assumptions made about the learners' state of knowledge. For instance, one language lesson (2006/47) required learners to debate the topic, "It is useless to educate a girl child". Not only is the topic sexist, it ignored the fact that the particular learners were 15-16 year old Zimbabwean urbanites in whose social milieu such a topic is no longer an issue. Another lesson required the learners to debate whether rural life is better than urban life. Again such topic choice, whether democratically made or not, patently neglects both social and cultural awareness, thus unwittingly ignoring the learners' state of knowledge. Topics like these may sometimes find their contexts in literary texts, exemplifying certain attitudes. Another student teaching the irregular verb in English, rightly or wrongly, assumed learners had noticed irregularity of verb forms in English but said nothing about how the irregularity might affect their speech and writing, but these were a form two class! Interestingly, no such lesson plan gaffes were observed in Batch 2.

A consideration of the scheme of work may suggest to the student teacher, early tasks or activities that would help identify learners' prior attainment and preferred learning styles, especially as they will be passing from their regular teacher to the student. Student teachers must simply establish what their learners already know, understand and can do as posited by Joyce et al. (2002); and Olson & Torrance (1998). The student teacher may want to devise his/her own techniques for finding out this knowledge. Such knowledge is vital to learner motivation, behaviour and achievement. Student teachers also need to contend with challenging classes whose weaknesses in literacy may require an understanding of their state of knowledge. It is essential, therefore, that student teachers realize that schemes of work, drawn from relevant syllabi authenticate their work and are the essence of all lesson objectives.

(c) Identifying the learning objectives for learners

Learning objectives determine the direction of any learning experience. Objectives may be identified firstly in terms of the learners' knowledge, understanding and skills. They can also be in terms of attitudes and personal development. The decisions about the quality and quantity expected are important to lesson planning. Of the sixty-six lessons observed in Batch 1, sixteen had ill-designed objectives, putting to question, what learning, if any, had taken place. For example, a comprehension lesson (2006/44) had these two stated objectives (quoted verbatim):
    (a)   To read passage; and
    (b)   To answer questions.

This may be an extreme case but drawing lesson objectives is generally a difficult task for student teachers as confirmed by Capel et al. (1995); Cohen et al. (1996) and Cmelewski, W., Partriarca, Ries, Rosado, & Stewart, (2012). The nature of these difficulties is wide ranging. Some objectives read more like general aims for a course, especially in languages. These are often imprecise as the following example from transcript (2006/56) shows. It reads:

Pupils will answer ten questions.
This does not tell anyone, the student teacher included, what kind of learning these questions should lead to. Similarly, a student teacher sharing learning objectives and outcomes may not be doing much of that in a language class when s/he tells the class (verbatim):
'Today we are going to learn about a man who was a friend to all".

The content in this case was about Jairosi Jiri, a renowned Zimbabwean philanthropist but the sharing would be more beneficial if it were skill-based. The same statement of intent would be particularly fitting if introducing a Religious Studies lesson, if perhaps the lesson was based on a selection such as the 'The Good Samaritan". Several student teachers showed this inability to distinguish appropriateness of objectives by subject, often ending with inexplicit and non-specific lesson focus. However, student teachers may sometimes need to state non-explicit or immediate objectives because of the very nature of some legitimate expectations. For instance, a language teacher stating:

> "Pupils are going to use Shona/English/Ndebele in the lesson"; OR
> "Pupils are going to avoid the irregular verb mistakes pointed out to
> them in a previous lesson";

has setting out a goal that is both long term and short term.

Batch 1 tended to lack this sort of understanding of lesson objectives. Rather, objectives were generally the measurable and performance types only at the expense of learners' attitudes to the subject matter and personal growth. Also neglected were the objectives where structures and functions could have been covered previously. One student, (2004/1), scheduled two lessons on English nouns in one week and for both of them had the single non-specific objective, "To learn to use nouns". It is hoped this was only an instance of poor delineation of objectives and that the two lessons had logical gradation and variety. In Batch 2 while lesson objectives were evidently set out, the single shortcoming noted was in the ordering of learning objectives. Transcript 2013/4 for example, observed that a summarising task was given immediately after silent reading of a passage where perhaps low order tasks could have enhanced student grasp of content before engaging such a high order thinking skill.

Way too many student teachers teaching either of the two languages English and Shona often set the objective, "Reading with understanding" for comprehension lessons without specifying how or why such understanding might be achieved. Such student teachers may have been perfectly aware that understanding what one reads is essential but were unclear about how this might be developed and why it is important to their learners. Depending on the nature of the reading material, pupils may be required to understand concepts, reasons, effects, principles, processes, and so on. Possibly the particular student teachers did not necessarily realise that different reading strategies were needed for pupils to show understanding of what they read.

The paucity of resources often led to large size groups expected to read silently to locate information, for example. Thus even those student teachers who were perfectly aware of

the need to employ different strategies to foster understanding, the how and why objectives, were often hampered. Where reading was broken down to micro-skills such as requiring learners to list, name, identify, recall (at least at the lower order level) the drawing of the objectives became much easier. There were many student teachers who were able to do that and it was hoped the understanding they required occurred. At the same time, language teachers did not always discriminate between objectives for language study and those for literature. There were cases of failure to treat literature as content and so some objectives lacked relevance, unless a student sought to specifically teach language through literature, a possibility explored by Moyana (2008) and found to add interest to language learning for learners who do not eventually sit literature examinations.

Some lessons were overloaded with objectives, a more preferable scenario according to Cohen et al. (1996, p.111). He says, "Inexperienced student teachers do not possess the understanding of planning, organizational and pedagogic issues … it is a useful principle to over-plan rather than to under-plan". What student teachers hoped to do was often more than they could, given the paucity of resources, time, and class size. This would have been appropriate but perhaps unmanageable in the time available. This was noted with student teachers working with slow classes, for example 2005/41 and 2013/3.

Unmotivated and badly behaved learners, large classes and insufficient resources were some of the factors that contributed to the student teachers' inability to meet their lesson objectives even where these might have been appropriate and manageable in the first place. The reverse was also true of classes where the student teacher might have under-planned, and ended up spending too much time on objectives requiring low order thinking, 2013/2 for example. A lack of reflective thought in delineating objectives was evident in too many cases, adversely affecting lesson development and reducing teacher effectiveness as posited by Pollard & Tann (1998). Closely linked to the drawing of objectives is lesson evaluation; however this is discussed within the general structuring of lessons.

(d)   Selection of appropriate pedagogic approaches

The drawing of suitable lesson objectives is bolstered by the selection of appropriate pedagogic approaches. For Batch 1, the selection of appropriate pedagogic approaches was not an easy task. The basic problem grew out of an inability to distinguish the nature of learning objectives for a particular lesson. Where a lesson objective directly sought the acquisition of new knowledge or skills; or inductively attempted to develop a concept or process, it needed to be handled differently from the one meant to consolidate or refine skills and enhance understanding.

For each objective type, certain teaching approaches are most appropriate. Student teachers were not found explaining or demonstrating as required, and often fell back to questioning rather than initial exposition, 2013/6 for example. Thus questioning in this case was inappropriately scheduled and yet questions form a significant amount of

teacher talk in the average classroom (Petty, 2004). It was noted verbatim in one transcript, "More care…should be taken with teacher's exposition so that the teacher avoids too much initial questioning". One student successfully used the lecture method at the exposition stage (2004/8) and went on to engage the class inductively in developing the concept of forgiveness by getting them to collect instances of forgiveness in the specific gospel by sifting available information. In this way note-making was especially practised and data consolidated.

In a Geography lesson (2004/11), it was observed that the student "… needs to reduce the testing of pupils' knowledge she does before any actual exposition – it reduced the usefulness of her map of Africa". This would have been a good opportunity to get pupils to construct categories for information, generate and test rules especially as the unit was on weather, a topic with many themes.

A typically exploratory learning objective is intended to consolidate or refine skills and understanding. In one lesson, after the teacher's exposé on the letter format (2005/18), it was left to the learners to decide what information to collect. They obtained data and analysed it before making decisions about what content they were going to include in the group letters to their local councilor. For a form 2 class this may have been adequate but for a higher class more skills could have been practiced, e.g. note-making, interviews and so on. Whatever pedagogical approach is employed, it determines what teaching episodes a lesson may be broken into. Each of these episodes ought to be a learning objective and an expected outcome, achieved through choosing an appropriate pedagogical approach.

(e)   Structuring the lesson

Sequencing a lesson into distinct learning episodes enhances its effectiveness. A lesson has to have a beginning, during which teacher input is made. The middle of the lesson is usually made up of learning activities for pupils and a review of the lesson coming last. Each lesson episode is expected to have a distinct purpose and a distinct outcome, learning objectives must be suitably tailored towards these ends (Joyce et al.2002). Starter or warm-up activities, in most cases tended to be a recap of previous lessons, for practising skills or consolidating knowledge. However where knowledge gaps were noted, these were not satisfactorily handled (probably nerves because of observation?) or the student teacher strictly sticking to his/her work plan, no matter what!
In several instances, sequencing of learning episodes did not always follow such learning principles as beginning with the simple and leading on to more complex tasks. Some of the student teachers rightly made a point of explaining lesson objectives and outcomes to their learners. But in many cases this was not so. For example, in transcript (2005/26) and to some extent in 2013/3 too, it was observed that "…pupils waste learning time as the student teacher is busy putting up questions on the chalkboard, groups ignore given tasks". This was a typical example of where the structure of the lesson had not been really thought through. The pace of such a lesson was slowed down and effectiveness not achieved: yet the objectives of this lesson were judged as "clear, manageable and useful

for encouraging thinking". Thus, the lesson in this case failed to live up to the expectations set in the plan.

In another lesson (2005/28) the student teacher hardly varied procedure. On the whole discussion seemed her *modus operandi*. This in itself points to vagueness about how this student teacher thought her language lesson should proceed. Thus there was evident lack of effectiveness, variety, and consideration of the individual learner. There were several cases of such poor lesson development with the result that the effectiveness of several lessons was thrown into doubt because whatever objectives were set out, they were not seen to have logically led to effective learning.

The lecture observer noted in several transcripts (2004/9, 2004/11, 2005/27) that…"lesson development should consider actual teacher exposition followed by class activities". New learning was introduced by student teacher's input. This was not always evident in some of the lessons observed. Although several student teachers were commended for their judicious use of questions, more reflective thought was required to prepare questions that facilitate learning. Users of the Socratic approach seemed to engage learner attention meaningfully at A Level, 2005/21 for example. In several instances, questioning seemed to lack overt planning and sequencing so as to promote higher order thinking.

Repeating questions was observed to cause inattention instead of developing knowledge and understanding, as observed in cases 2005/32 and 2005/19. Another weakness noted was that some student teachers failed to make use of the learners' responses, especially the wrong ones. Often there is need to show or explain why a certain answer is wrong. The wrong answers may be important learning points especially for developing knowledge and understanding. However 2005/30 and 2005/35 ably used the learners' responses and allowed them time to reflect on their activities All these are aspects of lesson development that determine a teacher's effectiveness.

Closely linked to lesson structuring is the way student teachers evaluate the lessons once they have been taught. In general terms, lesson evaluations should be based on a lesson plan's specifically stated objectives as well as a wide range of other pertinent factors that may enhance or detract learning. Petty (2004: 492) captures a whole plethora of possible lesson evaluation interests thus:
 … communication skills; introduction; teaching methods; teaching aids; student involvement; direction and control; timing; strengths and weaknesses; appearance of teacher; voice and mannerisms; teacher confidence; discipline; student interest in content; appropriateness of objectives; appropriateness of methods; worksheets and other resources; and so on.

The better student teachers for example: 2004/15, 2005/20, 2005/21, 2005/22 and 2013/2, used evaluations to check their own progress by being critical of their own practices. For some this was generally a cause for concern, going by the observation transcripts. In far too many cases this task was neglected or not done promptly. It is

difficult to say how student teachers who were negligent with evaluations proceeded with their next lessons without reflecting on the previous ones. Where a student had several classes at the same form level, they did not always evaluate these separately. Some evaluations seemed more appropriate as work coverage records for schemes. Individual learners were also evaluated but the student teachers hardly had anything to say about what they themselves thought they were doing well or what they could have done differently.

Many tended to evaluate lessons in terms of strengths and weaknesses but some of the purported weaknesses were ludicrous. For instance, 2004/16 recorded the fact that a group was made up of girls only as a weakness, without any explanation. They also had little to say about the effectiveness of the teaching methods they used. Several student teachers appeared to evaluate lessons in terms of learner participation only. Further, learner tasks that were poorly done did not seem to merit much comment, for example 2013/2 does not account for a series of zero scores in his mark records as part of his lesson evaluation. Clearly some of the student teachers failed to appreciate that their own effectiveness as teachers could only grow out of their own willingness to constantly reflect on their teaching with a view to improve it.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is evident from this discussion of formal but un-normed observation of Grad. D. E. student teachers' teaching practices that the lesson plan as a tool for teacher effectiveness remains problematic for some. This discussion should lead to a re-examination of practice by those in charge of preparing student teachers into effective practitioners who engage themselves reflectively when designing lessons so as to achieve maximum learning for their learners despite the different learning and teaching situations they may find themselves in. Student teachers ought to be able to contextualise lessons accurately within the national curriculum, draw up suitable objectives for whatever skills and knowledge they wish learners to acquire, as well as practice or develop thorough but coherent and appropriate pedagogic approaches. It is hoped that these individual reactions to student teaching practices arouse enough interest to lead to a wider norm-referenced study leading to a sharpening of practice in teacher preparation in Zimbabwe and elsewhere.

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