

Reflective Essay: EDUC 440

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### Abstract

After spending ten full, consecutive school days at Jefferson Middle School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, I have grown as an educator. I have gained a lot of insight on the teaching profession, and as a result, I feel as though I am more prepared for student teaching. I owe a lot of thanks to both Elizabeth G. Liechty and Cheryl Rotruck for letting me come into their classrooms during this course. I began my experience with assisting in grading papers, copying assignments, and then transitioned into lesson planning and taking more control in the classroom. Within this experience, I transitioned from observing, to teaching lessons that my cooperating teachers prepared, to teaching lessons that I prepared. Because I was in the classroom for so much time, I was able to recognize twelve different techniques from Doug Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion* (2010). I recall both reading about and seeing in place at Jefferson each of the following techniques: No Opt Out, Stretch It, No Apologies, Post It, Double Plan, Draw the Map, Break it Down, Call and Response, Do Now, Strong Voice, Threshold, and Warm and Strict.

### **Reflective Essay**

Between January fifth and twenty-third 2012, I observed and helped teach Spanish at Jefferson Middle School in Fort Wayne, Indiana. I worked with two cooperating teachers, Mrs. Cheryl Rotruck and Mrs. Elizabeth G. Liechty; I referred to them as Cheri and Gayle. These two teachers were very willing to let me take on the roles of a teacher, such as grading, lesson planning, teaching, and working with students daily. As a result, I learned a lot about the roles of a teacher and expanded my views on who I am as a teacher.

Each day at Jefferson, I began with Cheri's first period class in which I helped teach seventh grade students. These students are very different from the sixth and eighth graders from the other classes later in the day. If I were to stereotype or describe the average seventh grade student from this class, I would say that they are more reluctant to complete class work than sixth graders, but have more attitude-related problems than the eighth graders. These observations could be developmentally related, as seventh graders are more likely to be in the height of puberty than the other grades. Regardless of these issues, I was still able to work with these students both individually and as a class. I helped lesson plan and taught lessons collaboratively with my cooperating teacher and by myself. We began each class period with a journal activity so that the students would be able to review the previous day's lesson. In this classroom, I observed and incorporated varied teaching and lesson planning techniques. In just this short time, I saw students work on worksheets individually, do group work, practice speaking in Spanish, do listening and writing activities, and complete a short project.

After Cheri's first period class, she teaches eighth grade Spanish. These students are taking this class for a full year in order to receive high school credit for Spanish I. This class covers all material that the high school level class normally would, such as the Spanish alphabet,

colors, basic phrases, numbers, introductory level verb conjugation of all three types of verbs in the present tense, and a survey of the culture of the people that speak the language. While I was in the classroom, the students were beginning the process of explaining ER and IR verb endings as a grammar point, along with vocabulary concentrating on the names of foods. There were a total of thirty-five students in this class, so she did a lot of varying instruction between individual and group work. Her reasoning was that with so many students in one classroom, group work is just as important as individual work because students can help each other learn the material instead of being in a classroom that is lecture-based. I agree with this statement, but in my future classroom, I will be stricter with ground rules when it comes to group work, as it sometimes got out of hand while I was co-teaching. This was one of my favorite classes to work with, as most students were willing to work hard in order to receive the high school credit. Without a “C” in the class, students are not permitted to move on to Spanish II in high school.

During my third period, which was plan for both of my cooperating teachers, I was exposed to more teacher responsibilities. I aided in lesson planning, copying papers, discussing important ways to incorporate the textbook and other teaching materials into the classroom, planning ways to help students with learning disabilities or other exceptionalities succeed, and how to build relationships with fellow teachers and use each others’ ideas in the classroom. One of the main aspects of teaching that this experience really opened my eyes to is using one’s resources when lesson planning. Because they both teach the same Spanish classes, they use each others’ materials and ideas. This makes lessons more inclusive for both of their students and speeds up the lesson planning process for the teachers. I learned that lesson planning is not always done by one teacher for one class.

My first class with Gayle is her eighth grade class. These students are also taking the class in order to receive high school credit, but I still noticed that this class had a different dynamic than Cheri's class. There were three specific students that honestly led the class through any activity. Because of their class clown personality, they made even the boring lecture activities fun for the class. In contrast, Cheri's eighth grade class was primarily divided between really shy, but strong academic students or students that had a 'too cool for school' attitude. Gayle's class was a lot of fun to work with, but it was more of a challenge because they typically worked through assignments quicker, leaving the teacher and I to supplement class time with other unexpected activities for the students. For example, a group work based review packet took Cheri's class the entire period, but Gayle's class had twenty minutes left. Therefore, this class helped me develop my 'think-on-your-feet' skills as a teacher to come up with more activities when something takes less time than expected.

After this class, Gayle and I ate lunch together. I discovered that during her lunch period, she opens her classroom for students to come and eat with her. Some students come for homework help, but there was a group of five young ladies that came every day just to talk and be with their peers and my cooperating teacher. By doing this, Gayle really strengthened a good relationship with these students and it was evident that they really liked her and looked to her as a role model. Some conversations with these ladies were personal about their peers or family, whereas some were actually about school/academics. Because I was with these ladies each day as well, I got to know them both personally and within the classroom as students. This helped me realize the value of having a relationship with students inside and outside of the classroom, especially at the middle school level.

Gayle's second class is seventh grade students, the same class as Cheri's seventh graders. These students only take the class for a half year and only study very basic concepts, like phrases, colors, numbers, and some foods. This course, as I found out, is designed to introduce the students to the language to see if they would be interested in taking Spanish in high school (or the eighth grade Spanish I). I co-taught this class starting on day one, then transitioned into teaching lessons that my cooperating teacher made, ending the experience with lessons that I planned myself. I honestly did a lot of experimental type lessons on this class to see what works and what does not work when it comes to classroom management, individual work, and group work.

I ended each day at Jefferson with Cheri's sixth grade students, as Gayle teaches FACS last period. This class is a half year course as well; for the first nine weeks, students learn how to say the colors, numbers, and basic phrases in Spanish, then learn the same concepts for the second nine weeks in French. This class is a way for students to see which language they like best and which culture/countries interest them the most. Unfortunately, if a student likes French instead of Spanish he or she cannot take French until his or her freshman year of high school. Because of this, the majority of students take Spanish anyways in both seventh and eighth grade. While I was in this class, I did not help teach. I answered students' questions and worked with students that were struggling, but all instruction was done by my cooperating teacher. During this period, I sometimes just helped grade papers from the other classes or lesson plan.

Upon completing this experience, I have found both strengths and weaknesses in myself as an educator. The strength that I found the earliest in this experience is that I am confident in my content area. Because of my previous classes and study abroad experience in Spain, I learned a lot about both the language and the cultures that speak the language. I felt as though I had

multiple examples and personal experiences to share with the students when discussing a given topic, instead of just pictures and words from a textbook. I made the content more personal and relevant, and in doing so, I found that I knew more than I thought I did when it comes to content knowledge. My second strength that I developed during this experience is learning how to maintain patience and develop other ways to re-explain and describe a concept when a student is confused or misled. I have always enjoyed helping others understand concepts, but maintaining patience while doing so was a weakness previous to both this experience and my experience in fall 2011. Both experiences contributed to teaching me how to explain concepts slowly, effectively, and correctly. I believe this is because, due to having more constant and direct contact with students, I have a better understanding of how students learn, so I am better prepared to explain concepts in a way to help them do so. My third strength that I developed as a result of this experience is realizing that my creativity in lesson planning is both fun and helpful for students. I knew before this experience that I was capable of planning great lessons, but planning and really doing are completely different situations. Through this experience this January, I was able to actually implement the lessons that I was creating and even some that I had already created during fall semester. It was a great confidence booster to see that what I thought would be fun and helpful for students really was.

With all strengths as an educator, come weaknesses. During this experience, I noticed some weaknesses in myself as a teacher, but three specific weaknesses really stood out. My first weakness is that I realized that I had not previously thought about how I will begin each period. This is a very basic part of teaching, but can really make or break the tone for the whole class period. Previous to this experience, before I would teach a lesson, my cooperating teacher would begin the class period, then I would begin teaching. The beginning of this experience was no

different. However, as this experience progressed, I was forced to think about how to effectively start each class period and set a positive tone for the class. I know that I should already know how to do this, but I had never really had to do it before. I cannot stress enough the difference I have seen in the way that a class goes when it comes to starting a class with a negative tone or a positive tone. Upon entering student teaching, I plan to set a goal to start each class period with a positive tone and begin instruction as soon as possible. I know that I need to do more thinking on how to do so before I take over the classroom in my placement. My second weakness is another simple concept that I need to fix. It was brought to my attention that during a lesson, I pace myself appropriately, but when giving instructions for an assignment, I tend to talk too quickly for students to understand me. To fix this problem before student teaching, I have set a goal for myself to speak slower when giving instructions and to help students understand by writing the assignment and coinciding instructions on the board. My third weakness that I noticed during this experience that needs to be addressed before student teaching is that I tend to take students' apathy-like attitudes as a personal note that they do not like me or my lesson. I know that not all students will like me; that is a fact for even the most amazing teachers out there. It is impossible to please everyone. I am mainly referring to the fact that I apparently need a new way of looking at student apathy. I need to develop a better way to handle this than to simply take it as a personal attack on my teaching. I have made a goal for student teaching to address student apathy as a motivator for me to motivate them and ideally help them understand the importance of having an education and being a good student. My method for doing this will be to first identify whether the student is apathetic in all classes or if the problem is only evident in my class. Then, I will talk to the student to further identify the reason for the problem and find a way to adapt my teaching style to involve the student or to further stress the importance of education.



Looking at this experience from a research standpoint, a lot of what my cooperating teachers and I were doing with the students throughout this experience is explained in Doug Lemov's *Teach like a Champion* (Lemov, 2010). He explains forty-nine different techniques that he believes to be the best teaching strategies, twelve of which I noticed my cooperating teachers and Jefferson Middle School use frequently. The twelve techniques that I noticed to be implemented into my teacher's classrooms can be divided into seven categories: Setting High Academic Expectations, Planning that Ensures Academic Achievement, Structuring and Delivering Your Lessons, Engaging Students in your Lessons, Creating a Strong Classroom Culture, Building and Maintaining High Behavioral Expectations, and Building Character and Trust (Lemov, 2010, p. v-vii).

Setting High Academic Expectations includes techniques such as: No Opt Out, Stretch It, and Without Apology (Lemov, 2010, p. v). The first technique from Lemov (2010) that I noticed my cooperating teachers using quite frequently is No Opt Out, a technique that states that "a sequence that begins with a student unable to answer a question should end with the student answering that question as often as possible" (p. 28). Basically, this technique strives to ensure that students that reply to questions with 'I don't know' will be able to soon be the one to offer an answer after hearing another student's reply. Each of my cooperating teachers used this technique to provoke student learning, understanding, and participation. Instead of answering their own questions, they wanted the students to give them an answer. The second technique in this category, Stretch It, states that "the sequence of learning does not end with a right answer" (Lemov, 2010, p. 41). Instead teachers should take correct answers and ask students to add depth or nuance to their answers. Offering a simple answer is not viewed as being enough or satisfactory in the view of the technique. My cooperating teacher used this technique when

discussing a culture topic. For example, when talking about a custom in the target culture, my teacher would ask the students to elaborate on their answers by giving an explanation on why they thought that the culture would do something, as a way of accessing upper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. The last technique from the category that I noticed in my classrooms in the concept of Without Apology (Lemov, 2010, p. 51-55). This concept is based on the idea that we should never apologize to our students for teaching a certain part of our content, assuming it to be boring or blaming on someone else that we have to teach it (Lemov, 2010, p 52-53). For example, I believe that it is important to tell students why they must learn a certain concept, but that it is a very bad idea to say, "I know this may not be fun, but you have to learn it. I am sorry." Saying something like that to students can set a very negative tone for the whole semester, as the teacher is basically admitting that even he or she finds the content boring. If the teacher is disinterested, how are the students going to be motivated to learn? I picked up on this being a very important aspect of teaching and introducing a new class when I was at Jefferson on the first day of their new semester. My cooperating teachers stressed to students the importance of learning another language, but never once said that it would be boring or apologized that it was a required course. They showed enthusiasm and interest in their content area every day that I was in their classrooms.

The next category of techniques from Lemov (2010) is Planning that Ensures Academic Achievement, which includes Post It, Double Plan, and Draw the Map (p. v). Post It occurs when a teacher has decided on the daily objective and posts it on the board or in a place in front of the room for students and administration alike to see (p. 63-64). This concept was designated as a school wide 'rule' for all teachers. In each classroom throughout Jefferson Middle School, all teachers write the overall objective for each individual class period. This helps students

understand and recognize the daily goal and shows administrators that teachers are actually setting learning goals for their students. Both of my cooperating teachers would list the learning objective on the chalkboard for each class period. The next technique in this category is Double Plan, which concentrates on the idea that the teacher often “forget[s] to plan what students will be doing each step of the way” (Lemov, 2010, p. 66). Teachers plan what they will be collecting, passing out, and/or talking about, but do not truly put thought into what the students will be doing. Will they be taking notes or just listening? Is there a worksheet to fill out during the lecture or just after? This technique focuses on making sure that students’ actions are thought of during the planning process, not just the teacher’s actions. Mrs. Liechty taught me how to do this technique. She always had the students taking notes during lectures or made sure to lay ground rules during group work. Instead of just putting the students into groups, she would make sure that they had only so much time to move to a new spot, set a time limit for the assignment, and told them whether or not they could move to other groups/ places around the room during the activity. The last technique that I learned about during my experience at Jefferson from this section is called Draw the Map (Lemov, 2010, p. 67-69). This is the “planning and controlling of the physical environment, which should support the specific lesson goals for the day rather than using the best approach to support the most lesson on average or, worse, to support ideological beliefs about what classrooms *should* look like” (Lemov, 2010, p. 67). Basically, teachers must make a seating chart and classroom arrangement that truly is a display of their teaching philosophy and the learning goals that the teacher has for his or her classroom. When setting up a classroom, the teacher must take all aspects into account. I was aware of this concept previous to this experience at Jefferson, but my cooperating teachers showed me a different way of looking at this concept. Ideally, a teacher would be able to move certain items in the classroom to fit each

individual class; however, that is not a realistic and attainable goal. Mrs. Liechty taught both Spanish and FACS, making her learning goals and access to materials very different from class to class. For the most part, she has done what she can with the space she has been given. Most of the Spanish class materials are in the front of the room, whereas the FACS materials are in the back of the room by the kitchens. The middle of the classroom is filled with the students' desks in rows for a lecture setting in either class. In contrast, Mrs. Rotruck's room consists of tables instead of desks to promote a more social foreign language setting. The back half of the room is divided between her eighth grade materials and her sixth and seventh grade materials.

The third category of techniques that I found to be pertinent during my Jefferson experience is called Structuring and Delivering Your Lessons, which includes a technique called, Break it Down (Lemov, 2010, p. 88-92). This technique is a "reactive strategy" that is used "in response to a student error at the moment the incorrect answer happens" (Lemov, 2010. P. 88). In a sense, this technique works as a sort of on-the-spot review session to help the student correct the error. This is a technique that I personally used during a lesson that I was giving over a grammar point on recognizing the pronouns in a sentence. In Spanish the use of the accent mark on the words 'el' or 'él' tells the different between the article or the pronoun 'he.' One of my students asked what the difference was after identifying them incorrectly. In order to answer the student's question, I had to take a pause from the original learning goal and review this concept.

The fourth category of techniques that I observed while at Jefferson is Engaging Students in your Lesson, which includes the technique Call and Response (Lemov, 2010. p. 125-131). This technique stems from the concept of the teacher "ask[ing] a question and the whole class calls out the answer in unison" (Lemov, 2010, p. 125). This technique can be use for academic review and reinforcement, high-energy fun, or for behavioral reinforcement (Lemov, 2010, p.

126). The process includes repeat, report, reinforce, review, and solve (Lemov, 2010, p. 126-127). I used this technique in both of my cooperating teachers' classrooms when we were learning new vocabulary. I would say a word and the class would repeat it back to me in the target language. Then I would say the word again, and the class would tell me the meaning of the word in English/translate the word. After using this technique personally, my cooperating teachers mentioned that they like the way it involves the whole class and that they were going to use it in the future.

The fifth category of techniques is Creating a Strong Classroom Culture, which includes the technique that I found to be very important in any middle school classroom, known as Do Now. This technique is similar to bell work, or "a short activity that you have written on the board or is waiting at their desks before they enter" (Lemov, 2010, p. 152). This is something that Mrs. Rotruck did for every class, except for her sixth graders. Every day when the seventh and eighth graders came into class, she would have the lights dimmed and have a few questions for the students to answer on the overhead. She referred to this activity as their daily journal and had the students write the information in a notebook. Every other week, she would collect the journals for a grade and to make sure that students were correcting their answers in their journals once she had gone over the journal with the class. I really liked this idea, as it was a way to have students come in quietly and get started on something. What I did not like about this activity is that it makes the class seem very repetitive after doing it every day in the same way.

The sixth category of techniques is Building and Maintaining High Behavioral Expectations, which includes the two part technique called Strong Voice and the technique called Threshold. In my opinion, this is perhaps one of the most important techniques for a teacher to have and use properly in the classroom. It follows the idea that the teacher can have control of

the classroom by the following “five principles in the ir interactions with students—or at least in the interactions where they are trying to establish control: Economy of Language, Do Not Talk Over, Do Not Engage, Square Up/Stand Still, and Quiet Power (Lemov, 2010, p. 182-191).

Economy of Language means that the teacher only says what is important and does not drag on; students know exactly what is expected of them so the class can move on (Lemov, 2010, p. 183).

Do Not Talk Over is a way to ensure that if the directions are really important, every student should stop talking in order to listen; the teacher waits to give directions until all other noise in the classroom ceases (Lemov, 2010, p. 183). Do Not Engage is a concept that enforces staying on task in the classroom; instead of getting off track by answering a student’s unrelated question, this technique suggests that staying on task and going back to the unrelated question is best for learning (Lemov, 2010, p. 184). Square Up/Stand Still is the next step that reminds teachers to speak both nonverbally and with words; this involves using signals in the classroom if words would be too distracting during instruction (Lemov, 2010, p. 186-187). Quiet Power is an idea that teachers should keep in mind if they begin to get angry; it asks teachers to remain calm and talk slower and quieter when angry instead of louder and faster (Lemov, 2010, p. 187). By maintain a Strong Voice, teachers should maintain a good control over their classroom. The best example that I can think of relating to this concept is Mrs. Liechty. She is very in control of her patience, tone, and overall way of speaking to students, even when she gets frustrated with them. Because of this, they respond better and quicker to her frustration and the problem is solved much more efficiently. To coincide with this technique is the other technique in this category called Threshold, which simply suggests that teachers should find a way to greet students by “standing in the physical threshold of the classroom—astride the door, taking the opportunity to remind students where they are, where they are going, and what you will demand of them”

(Lemov, 2010, p. 197). If teachers take time to greet students as they enter the room, it starts relationships with students and sets a positive tone for the class period. I noticed each of my cooperating teachers doing this, and I have seen this in many of my other field experiences prior to this one. This is a very important, yet simple tactic for teachers to follow.

The last category of techniques, Building Character and Trust, includes the technique called Warm and Strict (Lemov, 2010, p. 213-214). This suggests that teachers should be “both: caring, funny, warm, concerned, and nurturing—and also strict, by the book, relentless, and sometimes inflexible” (Lemov, 2010, p. 213). Just because a teacher follows and reinforces his or her own rules does not make that teacher ‘mean;’ it makes that teacher reliable. What some teachers struggle with is the balance between warm and strict; some teachers are too warm and get laissez-faire with their rules, while other teachers are too strict to the point where the students have lost respect for the teacher. While at Jefferson, I have seen great examples of the Warm and Strict teacher, while hearing of stories of teachers that do not possess the ability to balance these attributes. Because Mrs. Liechty had strict classroom rules, but related to her students outside of the classroom during lunch, she is a great example of a Warm and Strict teacher. Mrs. Rotruck also tries to get to know students outside of the classroom and tries to relate to them outside of just knowing what their grades are. I believe that this is, along with Strong Voice, the most important attribute of a successful, excellent teacher. My goal is to find my own balance between Warm and Strict.

After seeing all of these techniques in place, I can say that I have had a very successful and beneficial experience at Jefferson Middle School this January. I transitioned from observing and only helping students to teaching lessons my cooperating teachers planned to teaching lessons I planned by myself. I took on more teaching roles than I have had in any field

experience thus far, as I was there for full, consecutive school days. I was able to see how to plan for a whole week instead of only planning for one lesson here and there. I learned the importance of having relationships with colleagues, students, and other staff members in the building.

Because of this, I would definitely recommend both Jefferson Middle School and both of my cooperating teachers for future Manchester College teacher candidates. Pros of being at Jefferson involve the wonderful staff that is more than willing to help us know where to go in the hallways, learn how to change settings on copiers, and take over their classroom for such a short time. Since we are not student teachers at this site, I was honestly surprised and thankful as to how quickly the teachers at Jefferson opened their classrooms to us and let us take over without ever previously meeting us. That takes a lot of trust! If I were to reflect on cons about this site, I would say that the only cons I really have about this site are that I went here as a student so I was not getting the opportunity to work with new teachers, as the other students in my class were. They had not previously met their cooperating teachers, whereas I was a student of my cooperating teachers. Therefore, I had already created a relationship with them, but the other students in my class met someone new that they could use as a possible reference. Another con about this site is that I missed out on the feeling of being immersed into a while new staff since I knew most of the Jefferson staff. On the other hand, that made me feel like I fit in better there. Either way, I really enjoyed my experience at Jefferson Middle School. I got a full immersion-style experience into teaching right before student teaching. Manchester College is doing a great job of preparing me to be successful during student teaching.

Because of this experience at Jefferson Middle School, I truly feel prepared for student teaching. I am more aware of my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher and within my content area. I know what I need to work on and improve upon before taking over the classroom in my



placement. I am more confident in my teaching skills since I got hands-on experiences each day for a consecutive week instead of being in my placement 'here and there.' I now understand the responsibilities of a teacher both within and outside of the classroom in order to prepare beneficial lessons for my students. I can plan for a full week and I have a better understanding of how to order lessons plans over the span of a week instead of simply understanding how to order activities within one specific lesson. I was able to put some of my own personality into the classroom and understand what I can and cannot do with certain classes. I am much more confident in my ability to vary instruction since I was able to put my lessons into practice in a consecutive manner. I am much more ready for student teaching now than I was just a week ago. I not only owe this readiness to this course, but also to my experiences previous to this one. I have been able to take many ideas from previous cooperating teachers and use them to form my own teaching style and teaching philosophy. I know both what I do want to do in the classroom and what I do not want to do in the classroom based on what I have observed or done in previous field experiences from Manchester College. Each new experience in the classroom from freshman year until now has helped me decide what rules and procedures I believe to be best, what teaching techniques I believe to be most helpful, and what instructional strategies I believe to be the most successful. I have formed my own view on teaching based on what I have seen in other teachers' classrooms. I have taken ideas from professors, past cooperating teachers, and teachers that I had as a student prior to being a teacher candidate at Manchester College. With every experience in the classroom, I feel more and more prepared to be a great teacher. I am really looking forward to student teaching and learning even more about what it takes to become an excellent teacher.

## References

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