

# Contextual Learning Experiences in Pre-service Early Childhood Teacher Education

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## *Abstract*

*This paper describes and analyzes pedagogical strategies used in a course of teaching skills in pre-service early childhood teacher education. Contextual learning principles and theories of knowledge production and educational philosophy are applied to design pedagogical practices and assignments in this course. The strategies are filling students in the real settings for opportunities of constructing knowledge which is necessary in teaching skills practice, offering indirect and direct teaching skills experiential learning and training students skills of self-reflections and self-evaluation in naturalistic ways for learning development. These strategies are well-planned to promote students' self-directed learning in terms of course contents. In performing their tasks for teaching skills practices, they are challenged to make their own decisions of their missions and planning activities for teaching skills practices in authentic and targeted settings. Evidences of their tasks are managed to be collected in various forms for self-reflections and self-evaluation. Digestions of data in seminars are collected and applied for learning and skills improvement. Implication and donations for applying such strategies are also discussed. Flexible learning political and social contexts of learning-centered classroom are included in this presentation.*

## **Introduction**

During the past decade, there have been a great deal of attempt to make changes in the Thai educational system, according to The National Education Act 2542 (B.E.) and the education reform policy. Under the circumstances, a great number of issues related to educational provision have been argued and discussed among educators, administrators

including each group of stakeholders in the society to rethinking and finding the best ways to educate our children. Most of the time, teachers have always been considered as the critical factor of changes, particularly in pedagogical context.

Teachers are expected to be professionally competent, in a concept of a new paradigm of teaching; student-centeredness. In student-centered pedagogy, teachers are the ones who provide students opportunities to identify what they want to learn, to find the ways of learning about what they want to learn, to learn by the ways they choose and to evaluate their own learning. Such expectations are highly expected in early childhood education, in particular because each young child needs to develop his or herself as a unique person.

Consequently, pre-service education for early childhood educators needs to be well-planned in both theoretical and practical contexts. Students majoring early childhood education need to be able to conceptualize studying theories and able to apply those concepts in their practices. Contextual learning is pedagogical strategy that allows students to explore and accomplish their authentic learning. Owing to leading concepts and learning principles, various tasks of learning procedures are meaningfully designed, roles and responsibilities of both teachers and students are highly expected and collaboratively taken in actions. Even though the strategy is overwhelmingly sufficient, there are still some cautions to concern in application.

## **Specifications of Leading Theory and Learning Principles**

The initiation of this pedagogical strategy occurs when a question of how to enable student teachers in early childhood education, to be ready for the real situations in schools. To find the best solutions, the ideas of theory and related to the pedagogical strategy need to be specified. The application of the theory into practices needs to be clarified by indicating appropriate learning principles.

## *Leading Theory and Concepts*

Constructivist theory is widely applied to student-centered pedagogy nowadays, including this one. The different views and ideas of constructivist theory are intergratedly applied and generalized to principles for practice. Those three major perspectives are concerned and generated. In accordance with Jean Piaget, human's cognitive competence play significant role in learning development. While interacting or manipulating with environments, thinking skills are variably active in different levels. As a result, learning activities should be well-organized and respectively stimulate students' thinking (Fosnot, 1996).

As Piaget's perspective focuses that cognition activities are influential factor of learning in a human, Vygotsky's view is different. Opportunities in social interactions play critical roles in human's cognition development (Lave & Wenger, 1991 and Shaffer 1992). Accordingly, social interactions encourage human to learn holistically. Not only cognition competence is enhanced, students' socio-emotional and physical competencies are totally improved as a person. Social interactions require students to practice and use those competencies intergratively in different situations, particularly when the interactions involve people from diverse culture and socio-economic backgrounds.

Another perspective regarding constructivist theory proposes that human learns when cognition and social interactions are implemented in order to make meanings of things around them. Learning is nothing if the interactions are meaninglessly represented human's identity (Cobb, 1996). Whenever knowledge is constructed, it purposively expresses one's self-reflection and critical thinking. Everything has its own meaning according to its context, in the meantime one who interacts with surroundings explains his or her interactive experiences in different discourses, owing to interpretative contexts of interactions. Therefore, knowledge should not be learned by repeating it. Instead, rethinking and regenerating knowledge in changing world will make a difference.

## *Application of the Leading Theory in Pedagogy*

Constructivist theory is not a package of tools for teaching which ready for implementation at any time or anywhere. On the contrary, constructivist concepts need to be regenerated and appropriately adjusted to formulate a learning approach relevant to learners and their contexts (Fosnot, 1996). The following principles are driven from several concepts practically proceeded in this pedagogical strategy. This strategy is employed to a class of teaching skills for senior students who majoring in early childhood education.

1. **Experiential Learning** : In a school's real-settings, students are individually assigned to a kindergarten classroom and spend their daily life in experiential learning following to the classroom schedules. In each situation, students play different roles and responsibilities in which different skills and competencies are used interactively.
2. **Learning Topic Initiation** : Students' experiences in real-settings are elaborated and analyzed in interactive seminars. Analytical issues and problems relating to teaching skills are specified and initiated as topics to study. Students are decision-makers about the issues or problems of interest as well as learning objectives.
3. **Self-directed Learning** : Learning tasks and activities are designed by teachers and students in a collaborative atmosphere. Expectations of learning outcomes and details of job description of the tasks are identified, including evaluation method. Both individual and group assignments are provided to students and an agreement of each individual's responsibilities is necessarily made.
4. **Supportive and Meaningful Communication** : Along the learning tasks, communicative approaches and documentation are designed for collecting data and information gathered during the tasks. For example, a journal -writing is assigned to each individual student to narrate about scenery of activities performed by children. Videotape recording is operated when activities of teaching skills practice are conducted. Each piece of communicative materials are conceptualized and discussed in seminars for sharing. Students are supportively encouraged to express their opinions reflectively and critically.

5. **Self-evaluation** : Criteria of task-evaluation are set in relevant to learning objectives. Descriptive and analytical evaluation of each task is written in journals. At the end of the course, each individual student is required to propose an interested issue of self-evaluation to discuss in the last seminar. Meaningful discussion regarding each issue is participated by students and additional suggestions for solutions are provided by teachers. Portfolio is created and finally handed in.

These principles are put in action and run following through semester timeline schedules. The pedagogical activities are thoughtfully designed and required productive roles and responsibilities of both students and teachers in each step of learning procedures.

### **Expectations of Students' and Teacher's Roles**

Students and teachers play different role in the learning procedures. As students are constructive learners in "Plan-Do-Review" concept, teachers are expected to be a facilitator. However, both students and teacher practice similar procedural tasks in different aspects. Tasks in this pedagogical strategy consist of three stages; preparation stage, operation stage and conclusion stage. In each stage, teachers take different actions to ensure that students are able to complete their learning tasks.

In preparation stage, teachers are looking for schools appropriate to contextual learning. The physical and academic qualifications of the school are considered, especially, instructional approach has to be child-centered. This preparation needs to be done one semester ahead. When a proper school is selected and informed, junior or third-year-students who are going to take this course, are called for a meeting. A brief of the ideas is presented to the students. A discussion floor is open to debate the advantages and disadvantages of the strategy. The students are involved in decision-making. When the ideas are basically approved, the teacher plans the procedural tasks for everyone in details. A description of the pedagogical strategy is proposed to the school in a meeting before the semester begins. In the paper, every detail of the rationale, the objectives, the activity details and schedules, the roles and responsibilities of each involved person and institution, the evaluation methods and criteria and the expected outcomes are clarified.

The school is asked to arrange one class for each individual student. When everything is readily arranged, an orientation for the students is organized at the university and the students then go to the school and responsible for his or her own class.

In operation stage, three major activities are designed for students in accordance with the tasks of "Plan-Do-Review" concept. Firstly, during the first three-week-period, the students plan for observation to gather classroom events and write down details of teacher-child interactions in the journals. Additionally, teaching and problem-solving techniques found in the classroom are also recorded. Then, the collected data are analyzed and critically reflected to share in seminars. Secondly, plans for practicing teaching skills are prepared and scheduled for videotape recording. Each student is required to teach at least twice in the real situated classroom. In each teaching, each student plans the activity ahead of time and the teacher supervises and feedback about the activity and teaching procedures is given. Another teacher's supportive role is to provide equipment such as video-camera, cassettes and player, including the accessories needed for taping the students' teaching skills practices. After each practice, the student has to do self-evaluation regarding teaching skills performance. Consequently, the next practice is planned and the "Plan-Do-Review" cycle is repeated. Finally, during this stage a seminar is organized and moderated by the students and teacher once in every two weeks. In each seminar, the students' problems or issues of learning are proposed for discussions and sharing. The videotape cassettes are viewed for discussions. The teacher is expected to supervise the students to some extent. Primarily, the students are encouraged to participate and learn to critically and reflectively interact in seminars. Learning and advice gathering from the seminars are summarized and to be applied in the next practice.

In conclusion stage, the last seminar at the end of the semester is collaboratively moderated for wrap-up. The active participation is checked and considered as marks for evaluation. Therefore, at least one issue for seminar final discussion has to be initiated by each student. The written materials including teaching activity plans, journals, self-evaluation paper, are selected and organized in a portfolio and handed in for grading. The students are asked to evaluate and feedback the procedures of the pedagogical strategy.

## **Caution and Concern in Application**

Some factors that the students and teachers need to be aware of in the application of this pedagogical strategy are about the expectations of the roles and responsibilities of each person involved. As a result, the effective communication strategies are very important and very influential from the beginning to the end of the process. As the facilitator, the teachers need to build up the two-way communication atmosphere in order to follow up some thoughts and ideas for better understandings.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, it is obvious that both students and teachers learn a lot through this contextual learning strategy, especially learning skills. The students learn how to plan, do and evaluate their own learning in systematic and continuous procedures. Furthermore, opportunities for communicative skill improvement in meaningful ways are consistently provided. The teacher learns to share powerful role to the students by allowing them to make decisions. More importantly, risks are taken and challenged by the teacher to construct new experiential learning in which students and teachers are partners, who play supportive roles in order to be successful in learning together.

## References

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