Micro-Teaching in English Education: Some Basic Questions

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Micro-teaching is a teacher training technique first developed by Dwight W. Allen and his colleagues at Stanford University. Since its inception, micro-teaching has been adopted by a number of teacher education institutions that have become committed to it as a powerful tool in teacher training. Each institution has developed the concept of micro-teaching in its own way. The model I shall describe and question is the one I became familiar with at Stanford and continue to work with at the University of Massachusetts.

For those of you who have no idea of what micro-teaching is, picture the following situation: as a part of their preservice training, interns in English and other subject areas take part in a micro-teaching clinic. In this clinic, an intern teaches a lesson ranging from five to twenty minutes to a class of four students. Immediately you see that micro-teaching is a scaled-down version of the real world. The number of students and the length of the lesson are drastically reduced. One basic assumption of micro-teaching is that practice in this scaled-down situation will have beneficial effects when the intern meets his own class of thirty students for fifty minutes.

What are the advantages of reducing the length of the lesson and the number of students? First of all, it is economical. For an intern class of 150, approximately fifty secondary students are needed to serve in the micro-teaching clinic. With only fifty such students, the intern has the opportunity to micro-teach at least three times a week, and over a period of eight weeks he gains considerable preservice teaching experience.

Second, the scaled-down situation reduces the complexity of the teaching problems the intern faces without necessarily reducing the difficulty of the situation. The result is an increased focus on the teaching and learning process.

For example, the intern in English when faced with a micro-teaching lesson must first pick one aspect of the language arts that he can teach in five minutes to a group of four or five students. Let us imagine that the idea the intern picks is that of literary point of view. After a little experience, the first thing that the intern will recognize is that he can not possibly teach the concept of literary point of view in five minutes. What then can he teach? What component of the concept can he deal with in five minutes? He may decide that he can have his students recognize that, when the same object is looked at from different physical vantage points, different aspects of the object are seen. Because of the scaled-down nature of his task, the intern is required to analyze the concept he is choosing to teach, break it up into its component parts, and then choose the most effective methods for achieving his objectives.

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The result is a highly focused experience for the intern which increases the possibility of his insight into the teaching process.

Another vital aspect of micro-teaching that is a corollary of its highly focused nature is the teach-reteach cycle. Having chosen to teach the idea of point of view, the intern plans his lesson and then teaches it to his four students. Immediately after the lesson, he has the opportunity of discussing the lesson with his supervisor who has observed the micro-class. In the conference, the supervisor may use the comments of the students in the class which they have written on reaction sheets; if the lesson has been videotaped, he may play it back.

After the supervisory conference, the intern attempts to incorporate what he has learned from the discussion as he reteaches his lesson to a different group of four students. The basic pattern of micro-teaching, therefore, is a highly focused teaching experience, a supervisory discussion, a reteach opportunity, and another supervisory discussion. The teach-conference-reteach cycle, which can take place in less than a half hour, is considered one of the most vital and valuable aspects of micro-teaching.

Performance Criteria and Technical Skills

One of the major recent developments in micro-teaching is the concept of technical skills of teaching. Technical skills are behaviors of teachers which when utilized appropriately would lead to the accomplishment of what are called “performance criteria.” For example, in English a major performance criterion might be that the intern can lead a discussion of a poem in a way that actively involves his students. To accomplish that performance criterion, the teacher would have to be able to question skillfully. One aspect of questioning is the technical skill called “probing,” which can be described as the type of questioning procedures a teacher would use to draw his students beyond their original answers to his question. For example, an intern can learn to ask his students “Why?” “Can you give an example?” “Can you define that?” in such a way that he draws students beyond their first responses to a question.

Other technical skills involved in leading an engaging discussion might be “reinforcement,” the ability to reward students in such a way that they are encouraged to contribute more to a discussion. Something that has been given the awful label of “varying the stimulus” is a technical skill which means simply that the intern learns not to stand in one place, speak in the same monotone, and use the same gestures over and over again. The technical skill of “using examples” is thought to be particularly important for an English teacher, who is often involved in discussing abstract concepts which must be brought down to a concrete level if the students are to become intelligently involved in the discussion.

Models

To aid in the training of the intern to perform these technical skills, we have begun to use videotaped models of the technical skills. To produce these model tapes, we ask an experienced teacher to teach a micro-lesson in which he
illustrates the performance of the technical skill. Thus we might have a model tape of a teacher focusing on reinforcing techniques; another model might be on probing techniques, and another on the effective use of illustrations. The intern watches the model tape and then plans his own lesson and practices the skill in the micro-teaching clinic. His practice is usually videotaped, and he can compare his performance with that of the experienced model teacher. The modeling approach has been an effective training device because it frees us from just telling the intern what he should be doing; with the model tape, we can show him.

Supervision

Our experience with micro-teaching has affected our concept of supervising intern teachers. The major insight that we have gained from the micro-teaching experience is that supervision is probably more effective if it is as focused and selective as the micro-teaching experience itself. We have encouraged supervisors to limit their comments to the intern to one area of concern rather than bombarding him with a full-scale critique of all his weaknesses. Even if the intern wanted to, he probably could not change or react to all the things his supervisor traditionally would tell him. By focusing on only one area of concern in any one supervisory conference, we think that we do not so readily destroy the intern's motivation, and that we increase the chance that the intern will be able to act on our suggestions.

Videotapes

Throughout this paper I have alluded to the use of videotapes in the micro-teaching process. In addition to viewing model tapes, each intern is videotaped almost every time he teaches and reteaches. Although micro-teaching can proceed without videotaping, it is a powerful adjunct to the process. It is hard to describe how powerful a tool the videotape is in supervision. Marshall McLuhan gives us a hint as to why it is so powerful. As he would put it, television is a "cool medium" which leads to a great deal of involvement on the part of the viewer. When you add to the medium the fact that the content is the intern's teaching and his students' reactions, you can imagine the involvement with which he watches the videotape. The tool is powerful, and it requires great sophistication on the part of the supervisor to use it wisely.

These developments in micro-teaching are by no means finished products. Much remains to be done to sophisticate the process of micro-teaching. For example, those interested in the training of teachers of English are faced with the enormous task of looking at all the areas of the teaching of English and identifying performance criteria and the technical skills which would enable English teachers to achieve those criteria. Once the skills are identified, they could be integrated into a training process which fully utilizes the strengths of micro-teaching which I have discussed up to this point.

Questioning the Process

The very strengths of micro-teaching which I have discussed lead me to
question whether micro-teaching as I have described it is appropriate for a program of English education. Micro-teaching is an outgrowth of behavioristic psychology. It reflects a behavioristic view of the world. Micro-teaching trains teachers to perform in ways those who are running the program think are good. Like a programed teaching machine, the goals of micro-teaching have been set by those who administer the program; the goals are then analyzed in terms of their component parts, and a pattern is devised that will lead the teacher trainee to perform in the desired way, or at least at some minimal criteria level. The main technique of supervision in the micro-teaching process is to selectively reward or reinforce behaviors which approximate the skills we are trying to teach and to criticize those behaviors which do not lead the trainee to behave in the way we think he should.

Do we want to base micro-teaching on a psychology that has been developed mainly using rats and pigeons as the experimental subjects? Do we want to base micro-teaching on a psychology whose most prestigious advocate says,

Science is more than the mere description of events as they occur. Science not only describes, it predicts. Nor is prediction the last word; to the extent that the relevant conditions can be altered, or otherwise controlled, the future can be controlled. If we are to use the methods of science in human affairs, we must assume that behavior is lawful and determined. We must expect to discover that what a man does is the result of specifiable conditions, and that once these conditions have been discovered, we can anticipate and to some extent determine his actions.¹

In short, do we as English educators want to base a micro-teaching program on a psychology whose goal its chief advocate sees as the prediction and control of human behavior? As English educators are we not interested in the freedom of the human animal and not his control?

If we accept behaviorism as the psychological base of micro-teaching, are we not then involved in a program which trains rather than educates? Do we want to be involved in training teachers? If we do, when and how does such training relate to their education? I tend to reject an involvement in training English teachers for a number of reasons. First of all, do we know enough? To be really honest as English educators I think that we would have to admit that we know precious little about what good teaching of English is. At this point would it not be presumptuous for a group of us to get together and decide on a set of skills that our novices should master? Can we pretend that these skills would be the necessary ingredients for good teaching in English for all our trainees? Moreover, can we train our teachers to do what many educators consider to be the really important aspects of teaching? Can we train teachers to be enthusiastic about their work? Can we train them to empathize with their students? Can we train them to respect the opinions of their students? Can we train teachers to commit themselves to continue learning about English? I suggest that the things we can train people to do are really inconsequential when we look at the teaching and learning of English in a broader perspective. In short, I suggest that we do not know enough about

what good teaching is to know whether the skills being defined are necessary, and intuition tells us that they are certainly not sufficient for good teaching.

Even if we grant that we have come up with technical skills and performance criteria which are important to good teaching, I would question whether we should train our students to perform them. By doing so, wouldn't we be perceiving our interns as automatons who could be shaped to behave appropriately? As Peter Wagschal has written in an unpublished article called "Performance versus Experience Based Curricula" (available through the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts),

We would all agree that human beings can be manipulated, but the question is not one of fact but of value; the question is whether teacher education should be conceived and designed as a comprehensive system of behavioral control. Those who urge the use of performance criteria are taking at least an implicit stand in favor of manipulation towards the behavioral goals they deem desirable. I, on the other hand, would quite explicitly take the reverse stand: insofar as we consciously control the behavior of other people, we may be able to produce beings which perform in manners which we deem adequate, but we are in no way helping to produce human beings.

I would carry this further. Wouldn't you agree that there is a relationship between the type of people we are and the type of teachers we are, between the type of living we do and the type of teaching we do? It seems to me that that relationship is inseparable. Any attempt to train teachers, I think, presupposes an attempt to train human beings to be a type of person. Do we want to be involved in such training?

Another question I have about micro-teaching, as I have seen it developed so far, is the assumptions it makes about teaching and learning and about the role of the teacher in the process. Most of the skills that I have discussed, "reinforcement," "probing," "varying the stimulus," presuppose the idea that the teacher's role is to control the students and to direct the class. As those who are training teachers assume that it is their role to control the training of the teachers, the skills developed in micro-teaching reflect the same assumptions operating between the trainee and his future students. If we treat our interns mechanistically, how will they treat their students? As of yet, and I would love to stand corrected, I have seen no skills developed which assume any other role for the teacher than that of controller of the students' behavior. Yet it seems to me that some of the most recent interesting ideas about teaching challenge that concept of the role of the teacher. Those of you who are familiar with Carl Rogers' concept of a teacher as one who facilitates learning by acting as a resource for his students would find it hard to see how that concept of the teacher fits into what has been done in micro-teaching to date.

A purely pragmatic question along these lines of facilitating learning might be whether the highly structured micro-teaching process really does facilitate learning. I am reminded of a conversation between Dean Dwight W. Allen of the University of Massachusetts and Robert Mager which might be entitled "Students are better than we give them credit for being." In that conversation Mager suggested that we encumber students with too much in the way of instruction, assignments, and drills, more than is necessary for them to achieve
the objectives we have for them. He goes on to talk about his by now well-known meter reading experiment. He devised an intricate programed instruction system to teach girls to read complicated electrical meters used to test products on a production line. He found that his programed instructional system did reduce the training time, which previously took a number of days, to an hour and a half. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your point of view, in the next door laboratory he was doing a learner-controlled instruction experiment. In that experiment the task was the same, but the learner could turn the instructor on and off like a TV set. The students in this group achieved the same criterion level, not in an hour and a half, but in an average of twenty minutes. Those results led him to ask, "How is my program getting in the way of the students?" For those of us working with micro-teaching, it will be imperative that we be sensitive to the possibility that our highly constructed program might be getting in the way of some of our students.

The focus of my question has been on the psychological base of micro-teaching and its mechanistic use as a training procedure. I have no doubt that micro-teaching could be used not just for training English teachers but for educating them. But to do so we would have to forget the precepts of behaviorism and think in terms of education rather than in terms of training.

In educating teachers of English there could not be a presumption to come up with a list of skills which it would be necessary for all of our prospective teachers to perform. Even if we thought we knew of some skills that might be useful, we would object to training our students to perform them; instead, we would present them for their critical examination and let them decide whether they are appropriate for the kinds of teachers that they want to be.

Education as opposed to training presumes an interest in presenting and sharing with students experiences which will lead to self-insight and insight into the relationship between the type of human beings they are and the type of teachers they will be. In a process of education we would be interested in presenting them with experiences which encourage them to develop confidence in what they are and what they want to be, not in experiences in which the focus is on being trained to be what others want them to be.

Basic to education is a faith in the nature of our interns because we assume that they want to be the best they can be. Training, on the other hand, seems to me to say, We will shape you to be what we want you to be; we don't have much confidence in you. Training looks to standardization rather than diversity, constraints and requirements rather than options and freedom.

I hope that I have made it clear that my questioning does not mean that I do not consider micro-teaching a potentially powerful resource in the education of English teachers. The confrontation with smaller numbers of students for shorter periods of time and the use of models and television and focused supervision would be immensely valuable if they were used as a resource available to our prospective teachers rather than as a process they are forced to go through. But the initiative to use these resources must come from the students themselves. I have no doubt whatsoever that a supervisory conference would be more beneficial to the trainee when it is a result of his feeling
the need for it rather than that of the supervisor. The same options might profitably be employed throughout the entire program.

The main concern I hope my questions have raised is whether we are using and will use micro-teaching to mould and shape our future teachers or whether we can devise ways of using it which would be more consistent with the aims of an educational experience.