

Wings of Confidence

Teacher Training at the State Conferences

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Teacher training in art education usually takes place in the classroom, whether it is regular course work in the college/university classroom, or out in the field with K-12 observations and mini teaching experiences. Other locations, such as art museums, are highly useful in helping preservice teachers experience a variety of environments and possibilities for engaging K-12 students in art education.

As members of NAEA student organizations, art education majors are encouraged to attend state professional development conferences, but they usually attend the hands-on workshops, gather vendor goodies, and meet peers from other colleges and universities. Thus, while at these conferences, they tend to blend into the background as observers and watch the seasoned presenters and workshop facilitators present their specialty. In thinking about this near invisible form of student participation at conferences, it occurred to me that the senior, or more advanced art education majors, might want to “try their presentation wings” at a conference. Of course this can be an intimidating thought for students, since many experienced teachers feel hesitant to make conference presentations due to the general audience consisting of peers. However, there exists an extended teaching opportunity for art education majors and it is well worth the effort for students and faculty.

As a way to encourage my preservice students to actively participate in their state organization and to practice delivering a lecture or hands-on presentation to a larger audience than their own classroom or a public school classroom, a proposal for a student presentation was made to our state organization. It was accepted, and the assignment was on its way!

Because two out of the four students involved in this project had made teaching presentations to one of the art courses for non-majors on Aboriginal Art, they were more willing to accept this assignment. A third student assisting with the presentation was a graduate student, who is also a part time middle school art teacher. Her role in the project was focused on partial supervision, as well as active participation in the presentation.

My role as their instructor was to help secure the presentation slot and act as an “umbrella” supervisor. It was important for me to step back and let the group go through the entire process of doing the research, organizing the necessary materials (visuals, handouts, etc.) for an hour long presentation; practicing on the delivery

strategy, and getting a sense of timing; making the presentation to an audience of peers and teachers; and exiting from the site in order for another presenter to arrive.

The idea to set up an extra credit conference assignment as a means to encourage art education majors to actively participate in professional development opportunities came from my own experience at conferences. Because I had made several presentations at the state level and enjoyed this professional activity, I felt it was time to encourage others to participate in this form of service to their state organization. This idea, coupled with the positive results and educational benefits gained from student presentations to the general education majors in the Introduction to Visual Art course, contributed to my decision to initiate student presentations at our state conference. Other teacher training programs in the state were encouraging their students to try their wings and it seemed the appropriate time to get ours out there also.

The Student Presentation

A multicultural unit on Aboriginal art and bark painting that had been tested on general education college students was the theme selected for our conference proposal. *Aboriginal Art and Art Making* was the title and direction for the project. During the presentation, students discussed the art and history of Aboriginal cultures (art history); led a group discussion on the aesthetic qualities of Aboriginal art and art making in relation to the art of other cultures (aesthetics); facilitated a forty minute lesson on bark painting (as a suggested art process); and facilitated audience brainstorming on ways teachers could initiate a group critique, or some other form of critical study from the overall experience (art criticism).

As mentioned before, the art history and art production portion of this theme had been presented to non-art majors at the university and had been successful. Students organizing this presentation and working with the general education college students reported experiencing exhilaration from this unusual teaching experience and felt a higher sense of self confidence in their teaching. In fact, the art education majors gained a sense of “connection” to the class, and these students (the general education majors) in turn reported their interest in working with the preservice teachers. It actually created a positive change for all students involved. As the instructor for both classes, I participated as an overall supervisor and assistant to the art making activities involved in the unit.

Of course, since these particular art education majors had experienced a high degree of success with the theme in relation to older students, they were more willing to try their wings out at a state conference. To deliver a presentation to art education peers from other colleges and universities, as well as to experienced K-12 teachers already in the field, was a significant accomplishment and act of courage for these students. As their teaching coach in this situation, I reminded them that the conference audience would be similar in age to the general education college student and that the art teachers attending a state conference were there for professional development and not to focus on or criticize new presenters on their emerging presentation skills. I mentioned that their audience would probably respect their courage and effort to make a presentation and understand the presenters to be “teachers in training.”

To further elaborate on the anxieties associated with standing in front of a large audience, even one of our graduate students, who has been teaching middle school students for several years, felt some qualms about presenting to an audience of peers in the teaching field. It is easy to let the thoughts of a possible critical audience overwhelm the positive aspects of the experience, and this can intimidate anyone. It takes a lot of self confidence, motivation, and time to make a quality presentation and this thought tends to be the general rationale for not presenting.

The old visual quip of visualizing “a nude audience”, as well as the sensory idea of “smelling a rose” in order to calm down and find one’s voice for the opening statements, come to mind when trying to convince students that they can mentally control initial presentation anxieties. Many of us still have to smell up to a dozen imaginary roses to calm a fast beating heart before we begin speaking, no matter how many times we’ve stood before a new classroom, group of peers at conferences, or departmental colleagues! So, of course, “extra credit” may have to be thrown in as a motivational tool to get the less extroverted students involved.

Beyond these typical public speaking anxieties, students found the preliminary organizational work for a presentation to be more than expected, and this was a valuable learning experience for them. Just gathering presentation materials and organizing handouts was time consuming. Surviving their pre-conference presentation jitters was an accomplishment in itself. The end result for this particular group was positive and all walked out feeling exhilarated from the experience. Naturally, they were also thinking about the things they wished they had mentioned, the things they know they will improve upon, and definitely believing they can do it again.

Multiple Benefits Realized

When students make a successful presentation at a state professional development conference, it demonstrates the importance of teacher training taking place in a variety of environments. By designing multiple and varied teaching experiences for students before they enter the “real world” of teaching, art education programs provide valuable resources to the field of art education as a whole. The educational benefits of participating at a conference and presenting

a comprehensive art lesson to a group of K-12 teachers, offer an innovative learning experience for the more dedicated art education majors.

Students have a chance to not only get valuable feedback from their immediate faculty supervisors, but they can develop a presentation response questionnaire for their audience of experienced teachers in order to gain several other viewpoints. This gives them a chance to also network with teachers in the field and possibly make future connections for teaching placements or employment.

Having senior art education students try their presentation wings at a state conference also benefits the state organization in bringing new ideas and presenters to the yearly schedule. Students benefit by having a chance to be active participants in a conference and gain a greater sense of connection to the experienced art educators.

Teacher training programs benefit by encouraging their students, who are most likely to be the cream of the crop in their classes, to try their communication skills out on an adult audience of peers. This of course is a major service to the state organization and a reaching out beyond the classroom. The possibilities go beyond the benefits gained directly by the students and state organizations. If several colleges would get involved with this idea, higher education faculty from various programs throughout the state would be able to observe students from other teacher training programs, giving them the opportunity to share course materials and teaching strategies with their colleagues.

The possibilities for arranging innovative teacher training experiences are numerous when one looks beyond the typical educational environment. If it is true that teacher training programs and state art education organizations are interested in promoting and developing quality art education curriculum and programs; producing highly qualified top notch art educators; and offering professional development for teachers already in the field, then the state conference venue would be a likely target for extended preservice field experiences. The idea of encouraging senior students to present at state conferences may be a standard event for many art education programs, but for many, it may not be an option. This may be due to time constraints, overall teacher interest in state membership and participation, and a variety of situations beyond any group’s control. No doubt there is a wide variety of higher education faculty participation in state organizations, and **this** would be the key to **student** participation at conferences.

As with any group project scheduled beyond the classroom, additional energy and time is needed by both faculty and students. Whether they are students or faculty, everyone is on the fast track with major time and schedule crunches in education today. To even think of extending the teacher training classroom, by encouraging student presentations at conferences, might be excessive for many; however, it eventually encourages future participation from those who have tried their wings and realized, not an audience of critical eyes looking at them, but a group of supporting experienced art educators.