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Romar, Jan-Erik

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# STUDENTS' WRITTEN LOGS DURING AN ELEMENTARY CONTENT COURSE; A MEANS TO PROMOTE REFLECTION

Romar, J.E.  
Abo Akademi University, Finland

## Introduction

Although the impact of preservice teacher education has been debated for years, there is little knowledge of program outcomes related to preservice teachers' understanding of content and teaching (Dodds, in press). Reflection is suggested as a way to enhance teachers decision making power and autonomy and has a high priority in many teacher education programs (Gore & Zeichner, 1991). Reflective writing is frequently used in order to promote reflective thinking and actions. Results show that writing is suggested as a means for students to rethink and revise ideas, that reflection makes preservice teachers' cognitive processes explicit and thereby they form ideas in an active manner (Hoover, 1994). Similarly, they organize and think through new experiences and explore the relationship among them. Finally, Tsangaridou and O'Sullivan (1994) suggested that the supervisory process is central for reflection to lead to professional growth and development.

However, preservice teachers' reflections during early field experiences indicated a lack of attention to subject matter or knowledge of content (O'Sullivan & Tsangaridou, 1992). This was particularly true in learning and applying game play and game strategy (Rovegno, 1993). Similarly, preservice teachers have problems in transforming content knowledge into successful instruction (Rovegno, 1992; Sebren, 1995). They also tend to focus on personal levels of concerns where their preexisted beliefs and history are represented (Dodds, in press; Kagan, 1992). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe and interpret the reflection process uncovered in preservice teachers' reflective writing assignments during an elementary content course.

## Methods

Participants in this study were 19 fourth year students, 6 males and 19 females, enrolled in the teacher education program for classroom teachers at a small university in Finland. This was their final content course in physical education prior to student teaching. Prior to this content course all students had completed a four credits introductory course in elementary physical education during their first two years of study. During their third year, these students completed a ten credits course in physical education which included sport pedagogy, basic exercise science, and selected sports.

The course met four days a week for seven weeks and consisted of track and field, orienteering, Finnish baseball, dance and rhythmic gymnastics, and an early field experience. The focus in track and field was for the students to learn basic skills and that track and field could be fun without always measuring everything. In orienteering students were supposed to make different training routes for their own class. Baseball was built on the sport education model, where students work in teams for practice and game play. In the early field experience, students met five times off campus at a local public elementary school when some students taught and the rest of the group systematically observed the lesson. The researcher taught all these parts while a another teacher was responsible for the dance and rhythmic gymnastic part. Here students practiced basic gymnastics skills and several folk dances.

As one part of the course assignment students kept written logs, where they were to respond to the following questions; What did you learn about this sport today and/or What did you learn about how to teach this sport. Students could also ask about things that were not clear. The researcher provided personal comments half way through and after the course was completed. Nineteen of twenty students returned the log for final comments and all students agreed to participate in the study.

Data were gathered from students' reflective logs, which were collected and copied for later analysis. An inductive analytic procedure was completed with students' statements as the unit of analysis. A statement was defined as either a phrase or sentence that started with a capital letter and ended with a period. By reading and rereading the data, three major themes emerged. These themes were further divided into several categories. The categories were not intended to be mutually exclusive and a statement could be coded as having more than one reflective focus. The number of statements one student wrote in the logs varied from 72 to 540 and therefore the percentage for a category was calculated for each student.

### Results

Students' reflective statements were arranged into three major themes; content knowledge, self reflection, and teaching strategies (see Figure 1). Students most frequently wrote about content knowledge. Figure 2 shows that within this theme the content and topic for the lesson was most important. In addition, student attended to critical elements and the development of the skill, made connections to teaching elementary physical education, and attended to the context of practice. The category context of practice included statements about time, conditions, and equipment in practice. Sample statements are presented in Figure 3.

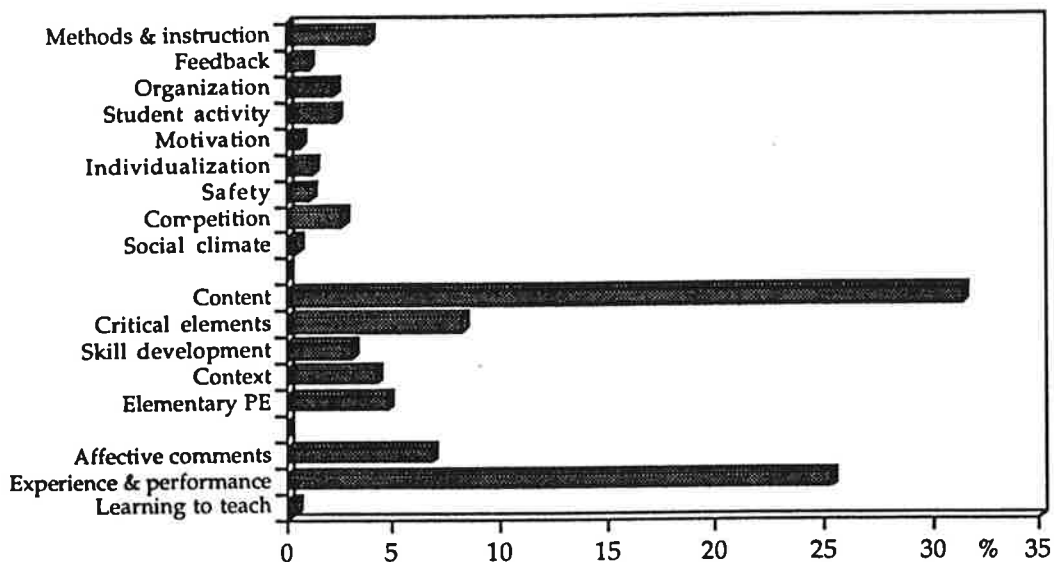


Figure 1. Distribution of statements among themes

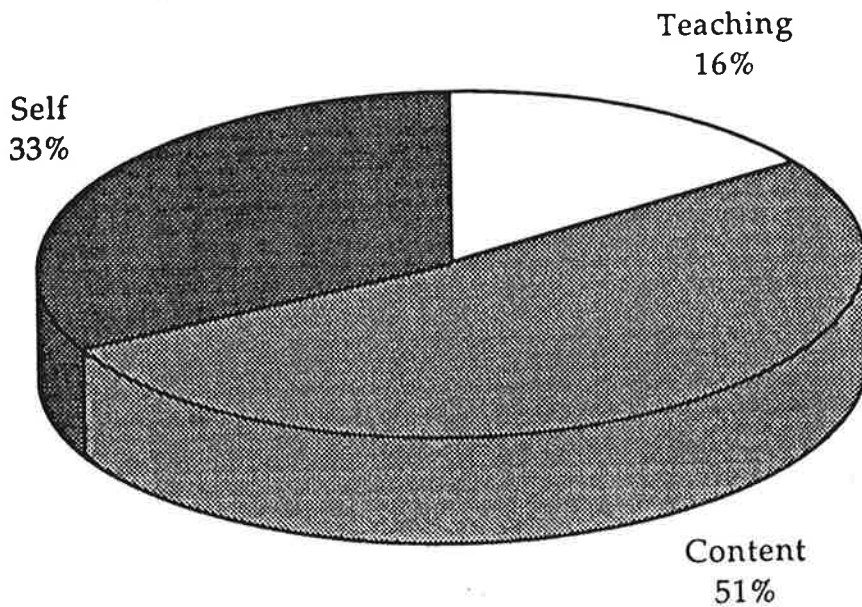


Figure 2. Distribution of statements among different categories

Content

- As a warm up we did a series of tasks where different parts were practiced
- Today we danced Russian folk-dances and an English square-dance
- The competition consisted of 100m, long jump, shot put, and javelin and that was our program today

Critical elements

- The elbow ought to be high and the movement starts with the legs
- In pole vault, thumbs up and hands ought to be shoulder wide
- I learned to stand in the proper position and to work with straight arms

Skill development

- Instruction progressed from part to whole
- In pole vault it is important to first hang in the pole and then to jump from the ground
- The jumping zone ought to be one meter long and one measures from the take off spot

Context

- We did not have time to practice enough
- The different equipments made practice more interesting
- How should one then do when one has a small gym and lack of equipment

Elementary PE

- Now everyone knows how a student feels after running a relay
- The kids don't have patience to practice small drills and tasks rather immediately they want to jump with full approach
- As we now have been practicing the different events one ought also to cover them in elementary PE

Figure 3. Statements and categories representing content knowledge.

Typically students first described the task for the lesson and then they wrote in different way about their their success, performance or experience with the task. Statements from the category experience and performance consisted of comments related to the task while affective statements were short and emotive. Students seldom described the task of learning to become a teacher. Sample statements for this theme are presented in Figure 4.

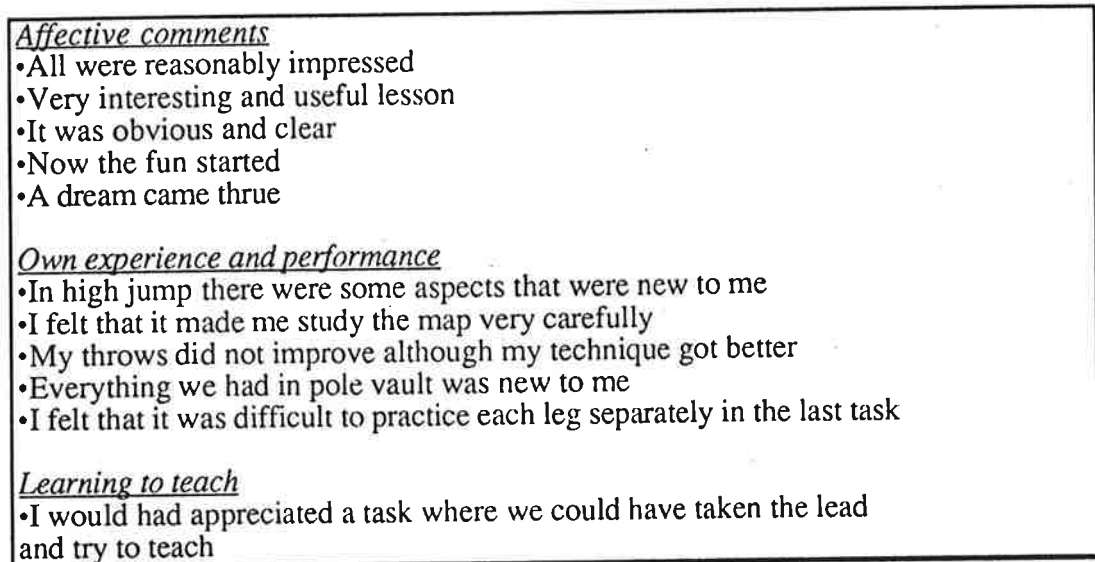


Figure 4. Statements and categories representating self reflection.

Finally, students least frequently attended to teaching strategies, and sample statements for this theme are presented in Figure 5. Within this theme students wrote about different teaching methods and aspects of instruction. They were also to some extent interested in reflecting on competition as a part of teaching in physical education, organization, and student activity.



### Methods and instruction

- Students rotated between different stations
- Work in pairs and instruct each other
- One listens more carefully to instructions and rules which are explained by friends

### Feedback

- Students benefit from being able to give constructive feedback to each other
- One way for the teacher to give feedback to the whole group
- I did not receive any feedback, if what I did was right or wrong

### Organization

- We divided ourselves into two groups and practiced batting and throwing at different places
- What I learned today was not to let children select their own groups
- The game play could have been divided into more groups

### Student activity

- Important to activate girls, especially in team games
- Why not change the game a little so that everyone can actively participate
- The teacher talked a lot in the beginning while students just sat

### Motivation

- Motivation arose within the group
- The idea was interesting and even motivating
- How can one motivate those students that are already successful in a sport?

### Individualization

- Everyone sets individual goals and read from tables how many points one ought to get
- A great opportunity to individualize
- Everybody has the opportunity to do his own race

### Safety

- Here one ought to think about safety, so that no one gets a shot in their head
- The fear not to be successful and to do a poor performance disappeared for most students
- In hammer throwing it is important that one does it inside the net and that everyone stands behind

### Competition

- I think it was important that the competition was conjured away
- So that it becomes a list with winners and losers
- Strange that boys are more competitive than girls

### Social climate

- The social aspect with passing and cooperation did not occur
- Bengt's group cooperated well during baseball
- These dances help to improve the group cohesiveness

Figure 5. Statements and categories representing teaching strategies.

## Discussion and Implications

Preservice teachers frequently attended to content aspects and to their own experience, success, and practical skills. Students' reflection was on a descriptive level, where they attended to what they did, as in a diary form. However, the logs were full of affective and personalized comments. Highly motivated students with an interest in the teaching and learning process is critical and can be seen in these affective comments. However, Hoover (1994) indicated that reflection on a level of personal concerns is dangerous because this might not lead to deeper reflection on educational principles and practice. In addition, students' history can either help or inhibit what and how students learn from teacher education programs.

Teaching strategies received little attention in this study. Interestingly, two students worked similarly with a literature review for their thesis about teaching physical education and they had a different pattern compared with other students. These two girls attended less to content for the lesson and more to other aspects of content knowledge and teaching strategies. It seemed that they could use their extended knowledge base in reflecting on the content course.

Students also reported that the procedure with written logs was beneficial for them in order to process the outcome of the course. This was an additional support for the reflective practice in a form of written logs, while the students then spent more time in processing what they previously had performed. However, it is important that students receive guidance in their reflective writings, so that they can move beyond a descriptive and diary level. The wide range of the length of student logs is another evidence that teacher educators have a central role in the education of preservice teachers.

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## ***PROCEEDINGS***

### ***Part II***

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