

Reflections on Classroom Practice: Student Insights into the Use of Video Self-Critique in an Educator Preparation Program

James Jurica

W. S. Kearney

Texas A&M University San Antonio
San Antonio, TX

Abstract

This article explores the perceptions of aspiring teachers regarding the use of video as a tool to assist with critical self-reflection. Data were collected from 8 students enrolled in an educator preparation program at a public university in Texas. Participants were video recorded delivering a forty-five minute lesson. A copy of the digital recording was uploaded to a secure website, which students were then able to log in to in order to view the video of themselves teaching. Students were then invited to participate in a focus group interview in order to provide their perspective on this experience. Participants identified three common areas of growth: verbal/speech patterns; physical positioning; and attending to the needs of all students.

Introduction

Self-reflection is a crucial component of educator development. In fact, many teacher education programs would consider their curriculum incomplete if reflection was not part of their training (Eröz-Tuğa, 2013; Fadde & Sullivan, 2013; Tripp & Rich 2012a). While self-critique is valuable in many professions, it appears to be particularly important for aspiring teachers as they learn from their first experiences in a classroom. Reflection will not always result in immediate tangible improvements. Sometimes the impact will take time. Whether the benefits are immediate or long-term, critical self-reflection is a valuable tool in helping teachers maximize their own potential (Kaasila & Lauriala, 2012).

Time is an important consideration in regard to teacher self-critique. Reflection generally takes place after the school day because most educators are not afforded significant amounts of time for reflection or planning during the school day. The lack of intentional time dedicated to self-reflection can cause educators to make decisions quickly and teachers may lack the time they need to think about consequences of their decision (Khan, 2015). Since reflection most often happens after the school day teachers must rely on their memory of the issues that stood out to them. Unfortunately, memory is not always reliable. In fact many researchers have found that once time has elapsed, memories of specific events in the classroom fade (Tripp & Rich 2012b). The use of video recording may be one way to help current and aspiring educators reflect on their teaching.

This article examines the utility of video analysis as a reflective strategy to assist aspiring teachers within an educator preparation program at a land grant University in south Texas. Specifically, the authors interviewed program participants in order to gain insight into their perceptions regarding the strengths and challenges associated with video based self-analysis. To the greatest extent possible, responses are provided in the participants' own words for the benefit of the reader. It is important to note that the authors are both professors within the College of Education in which this study took place. Accordingly, this study may accurately be described as action research. It is our hope that insights gleaned from this study may prove beneficial to faculty members who may be considering similar strategies within their own educator preparation programs and for individual teachers seeking to further their own professional development.

Literature Review

Benefits of Video Self-Reflection

Watching video recordings of one's self teaching has been shown to be an effective tool in helping current and aspiring teachers improve their skills (Penny & Coe, 2004). This practice can aid reflections in the following ways:

1. Observing one's self on video allows educators to see the lesson as it actually unfolds from multiple perspectives (Bryan & Recesso, 2006).
2. Utilizing a checklist of observable behaviors, reflection can be guided to identify specific positive and negative behaviors within the video that participants may not have identified on their own (Prusak, Dye, Graham, & Graser, 2010).
3. Watching a video of one's own teaching allows educators to observe some of the more subtle aspects of teaching such as body language and tone of voice (Schmidt & McCutcheon, 1994)
4. Watching a recorded lesson repeatedly allows teachers to concentrate on one targeted area of refinement at a time (Tripp & Rich, 2012a).
5. Pausing the action allows teachers to reflect on one event before moving on to the next. (Tripp & Rich, 2012a).

The use of video based self-reflection has been shown to have a positive effect on teacher performance in the classroom. Benefits have been identified for both pre-service teachers and in-service teachers and across all grade levels and subjects (Hawkins & Heflin, 2011; Reinke, Lewis-Palmer, & Martin, 2007).

Challenges of Video Based Reflection

While most of the research into video based self reflection is positive, it is also important to be aware of potential challenges. One of these challenges is overcoming a lack of knowledge in how to utilize the technology itself. For example, Cheng and Chau (2009) conducted a study in which participants were required to upload videos to an eportfolio environment. Becoming comfortable with the use of the technology was the first hurdle to overcome for participants who were unfamiliar with digital platforms.

Another challenge to video based self-reflection is that participant behavior may be distorted by the presence of the camera. Clarke (2009) encountered this phenomenon in her work with aspiring geography teachers, in which she learned that several of her participants acknowledged they had prepared a script for portions of their recorded lessons, which resulted in a loss of spontaneity within the lesson.

Perhaps the most significant challenge associated with video based self-reflection is the discomfort participants feel when viewing themselves on screen. This anxiety is reported by Sydnor (2016) who found that teacher candidates were particularly nervous about watching themselves on video when in the presence of a peer or supervisor. Discomfort with viewing their teaching videos is reported even in studies in which participants view recordings by themselves, but Fadde and Sullivan (2013) conclude the benefits student teachers gain from video self-critique far outweigh the initial feelings of discomfort they experience.

Engaging a Broader Community in Video Based Reflection

Teacher reflection does not have to be an isolating activity. It can also be a very powerful tool when used within groups. Paterson, Thomas, and Taylor (2011) examined the use of video based reflection within a learning community consisting of four mathematicians and four mathematics teachers. Lectures of the teachers were recorded and the videos were reviewed by each member of the group. Participants in this study agreed that the feedback was beneficial. One particular benefit of the community approach is receiving feedback from multiple perspectives. For example, one of the teachers in this study pointed out that her peers brought to her attention some behaviors of which she was not previously aware. Thus, it appears that the impact of video self-reflection is further heightened when coupled with peer observation and feedback.

Eröz-Tuğa (2013) has examined self and peer reflective analysis with student teachers. In this study, student teachers were required to watch one video of themselves teaching and another video of one of their peers teaching. The two would discuss what they saw on the videos. As a result of this dyadic approach, participants reported being more aware of both instruction and classroom management. The student teachers specifically commented on how providing feedback to a peer heightened their awareness about their own teaching in ways they had not been aware of before watching the videos.

However, not all participants respond identically. Seidel, Stürmer, Blomberg, Kobarg, and Schwindt (2011) also conducted a study in which participants were required to complete both self and peer video observations. Participants in this study said that viewing their own video was more useful and beneficial than viewing that of their peers.

Targeting Specific Growth Areas

While video self-reflection can be targeted to improve specific practices, the subject upon which educators reflect can vary widely. For example, one student teacher may choose to reflect on a particular incident involving student misbehavior, while another aspiring teacher chooses to examine how they explained a specific concept within a lesson. The focus of the reflection can also be guided. Pinter, East, and Thrush (2015) investigated the use of video feedback to see if teachers would increase their use of praise with students in the classroom. The researchers used a single subject design research model. During the baseline phase teachers were recorded and the

number of times they praised their students was tallied. After watching the video the teachers were recorded again. The researchers found that all teachers within the study increased their use of praise after viewing themselves teaching. Participants said the videos made them more attentive to their use of praise.

Video-Based Versus Non-Video Based Self-Reflection

In order to identify differences between video based self reflection and non-video based self reflection, Rosaen, Lundeberg, Cooper, Fritzen, and Terpstra (2008) conducted a study in which teacher interns were exposed to both models. The authors present three major differences between video-based and non-video-based reflection. The first difference was when using video as part of reflection the participants made more specific observation as opposed to vague or general statements. The second major finding was with the aid of video the interns were more likely to mention instructional aspects of their teaching. The third major finding was that when interns used video as the basis for their self-reflection, they were more likely to focus on their students and student achievement than on teacher-specific behaviors. Participants agreed that the video reflections were more accurate than memory alone. The researchers noted that when participants watched the videos, they were better able to prioritize aspects of the lesson that were most crucial to student success. The researchers also noted that with the aid of video, interns were able to replay recordings multiple times, which enabled them to identify areas of enhancement they had previously missed.

In sum, there is strong evidence in the literature to suggest the use of video for the purposes of self-reflections improves teacher practice and can lead to improved classroom performance. This particular study seeks to add to this growing and important body of literature by providing insights from the perspective of student teachers who participated in video-based reflection during their student teaching assignments.

Theoretical Framework

Teacher development is more likely to occur when teachers are confronted with a problem. The problem may involve classroom management or questions of instructional strategies. Reflection can lead to improved classroom performance but reflection in and of itself will not lead to improvement unless the teacher is committed to becoming better (Rosaen et al., 2008). Video is a tool that can aid reflection as a teacher sees what actually happened in the classroom and becomes aware of events that were previously unseen or forgotten

Teacher Self-Reflection Defined

Teacher self-reflection is the conscious act by an educator of looking back at a lesson or lessons, examining what happened within the lesson, considering what led to these outcomes, and looking for ways of improving teaching behaviors and student performance (Kaasila & Lauriala 2012).

Methodology

Data Collection

This study uses a convenience sample. Participants in this study are currently completing the field residency requirement of their educator preparation program at a land grant university in South Texas. As graduate faculty at this University, the authors have a vested interest both in helping students hone their skills as future teachers, and in measuring the effectiveness of specific learning strategies that are employed. Accordingly, this study may accurately be defined as action research.

Participants

There were eight aspiring teachers involved in the study. The demographic background of the subjects is as follows: Seven of the future teachers were female, one was male. Six participants self-identified as Hispanic and two identified as white. Five of the subjects were the age of traditional college students, being between twenty-two and twenty-three years of age. The three remaining students were between the ages of twenty-seven and forty at the time of the study. All eight students met or exceeded the university's requirements to begin field residency. This includes having completed core coursework in both subject area and pedagogy courses with a GPA of 2.75 or higher. The students were interviewed and accepted by the school district in which they were placed. The placements for these student teachers varied depending upon their chosen area of certification. One aspiring teacher seeking special education certification in Early Childhood through twelfth grade (EC-12) had a split placement. Half of her field residency requirements were completed at an urban elementary school and the other half of her placement was completed at a suburban high school. A student seeking physical education certification (EC-12), also had a split placement, completing hours at a suburban elementary school and at a suburban high school. One student seeking certification in English in grades 9-12 was placed at the same suburban high school. Two participants seeking general teacher certification in grades 4-8 were placed at an urban middle school in eighth grade American History classrooms. The remaining three students who were seeking general elementary certification in grades Early Childhood through sixth grade (EC-6) were placed in urban elementary schools.

The mentor teachers from the local school district were selected by campus administrators. Mentor teachers were selected based on two factors: teaching ability and a disposition conducive to nurturing an aspiring teacher.

The cooperating school district is a large diverse district in terms of both students and geography. Geographically it spans both inner city and suburban areas. It is multiethnic and the students come from diverse socioeconomic levels. Specifically, the student population is 59% socioeconomically disadvantaged. Fifty-two percent of students are Hispanic, twenty-nine percent of the students are White, thirteen percent of students are African American, four percent of students are Asian, and two percent of students are identified as "Other." There were greater than 100,000 students enrolled in this district at the time of this study (Texas Education Agency, 2017).

Procedures

The following procedures were followed. Approval was obtained from the school district, campus principal, and classroom teacher to ensure that each of these constituents understood the intent of the video-taping of aspiring teachers. After receiving this approval, consent forms were sent to parents of minors in each of the EC-12 classrooms where student teachers would be recorded in case their child happened to appear in a video. Participants were then recorded delivering one 45 minute lesson. A copy of the digital recording was uploaded to a secure website, which students were then able to log in to in order to view the video of themselves teaching. Students were then invited to participate in a focus group interview in order to provide their perspective on this experience. This focus group interview was recorded and transcribed. The transcript was then coded in order to identify common themes that emerged endemically from the data.

Results

Initial Trepidation

Many of the participants spoke of an initial concern over being recorded at all. As one participant who works with special needs students at the high school level put it, “My concern was, I’m special education, it could be a good day or a bad day. My students like to interact and cooperate and it was one of those days that some wanted to and others didn’t, so it’s an average day. Not everyone is going to interact.” Another of her colleagues who teaches at the elementary level agreed, saying, “I guess mine has to do with behavior because there are a couple of my kids in class that are rambunctious, I don’t know, a little wild sometimes, um, thankfully they were okay.” A third respondent confirmed this initial nervousness, saying, “One of the concerns that I had was the kids in the elementary were really distracted about ...having another person in the room but it turned out very well. It turned out better than I thought because I kept the students focused.”

Once students were able to get over their initial nervousness over being recorded, they began to see the potential value in this assignment. As one respondent put it, “And you can actually - I know this sounds weird – but you can actually critique yourself. Look at this - I did really good - but look at this part I can really improve on this.” Another participant added, “I just think that overall the video experience is needed because you need to see where you need growth in and how are you going to see that it you don’t have a video or something else showing you what you need to work on, so I think it is really good.

Recognition of Benefits of Video Self-Reflection

Identifying areas for growth. One of the most common responses among participants who watched video of themselves teaching was that they were able to identify areas in which they would like to improve. Although this area of improvement was different for almost every student, they fell into three common themes: verbal/speech patterns; physical positioning; and paying attention to the needs of all students.

Verbal/speech patterns. A total of three respondents reflected on their verbal/speech

patterns. One participant noted a desire to improve the confidence of her verbal delivery. As she put it, “When I heard myself I think I’m sounding confident and concerned, but in reality it’s a little shaky but not as it actually is coming out.” Another student also reflected on her speech patterns when she said, “Seeing the recording and maybe picking up on habits - saying ‘um’ too much – I have that image of myself now. So, in the future I can go back to that image in my head and kind of cut it out. So seeing it is more powerful than just thinking about it later.” A third respondent added, “I think it really helped me because when I watched the video I saw that I could be... clearer, to the point. I would be a lot more precise.”

Physical positioning. Four of the respondents spoke about a desire to alter their physical positioning in some way. Some of these responses had to do with changing their physical location in the room. As one respondent put it, “I’m in one section of the room and just staying there and I don’t really move...at all...and then I turn my back to the majority of the class!” Another participant had a similar reflection, saying, “I did pace the whole room, but I did so more on one side of the class, and I need to pace more to the other side.”

Another respondent was critical of her own body posture, noting that her non-verbal body posture might not be communicating the message of attention to the lesson that she intended. A fourth respondent noted a missed opportunity to use proxemics to redirect an off-task student when she said, “And then I did notice that at some point one of the students was a little distracted by rubbing his eyes. I realized then by just moving my body and giving him all the attention that it would make the lesson go smoother.”

Paying attention to the needs of all students. Five respondents spoke of a desire to ensure they were focusing on the needs of all students, and not just a certain group of students. For example, one respondent who is working with middle school students noted that she focuses too much of her time and attention on one group of students, “After watching that I see where I can improve... I need to (provide) equal time. So watching it allowed me to see what I need to work on some more.” Another respondent who works with elementary students noted something similar when she said, “I’m glad he brought up that point about looking at yourself because you get to see the video as a student would see you. And so paying attention to a certain group – I noticed in my video like, (my attention) was directed at a certain group and then I had a couple of other students here that almost had my side and feel like – um – so my attention was focused to my left opposed to the other two students.” A third respondent added, “Yeah, we don’t realize that – you can’t go back – we’re sticking on the person that we want and going on to the next thing. You don’t realize how many times we’ve actually addressed that person.”

It is interesting to note that some aspiring teachers focused more of their attention on students they feel they are reaching, while other teacher candidates focus their time on the students they feel they are failing to reach. Here is their feedback in their own words, “I call on students that I am comfortable with...students who, like I have a connection with a strong connection” While another respondent said, “(I) have too much attention (on) the people causing trouble and you’re losing attention to everyone else in the room.”

Identifying Areas of Strength: Role Affirmation

In addition to the self-critique that came from watching themselves on video, many students spoke of a rise in their self-confidence, that watching themselves teach gave them

confidence in their identities as future teachers. As one respondent put it, “I actually enjoyed watching my video because it was a confidence builder. I hadn’t actually seen myself teaching before so I noticed that was actually better than I thought I was doing.” Finally, one of the respondents talked about watching the video with one of his children, “I think she made a good point about actually being able to see yourself. Like my daughter saw me watching the video and she came over to watch and she said – You’re teaching! You’re teaching! She saw the perspective that I was the teacher – not just her dad.”

Discussion

It is interesting to note the initial anxiety that was experienced by many of the participants in this study when they were first recorded. This initial anxiety is consistent with previous findings by Fadde and Sullivan (2013) and Sydnor (2016), confirming that this is an important challenge for educator preparation programs to address. It may be useful for teacher preparation programs utilizing video based self-reflection to implement strategies to help reduce this anxiety. Ensuring that participants are comfortable with the technology tools themselves is one example of a strategy that could assist in reducing stress (Cheng & Chau, 2009).

Following this initial anxiety, participants were able to engage in critical self-reflection. There were three growth areas most commonly identified by participants in this study: verbal speech patterns; physical positioning; and paying attention to the needs of all students. None of the participants began by speaking about areas in which they felt they had done well. Instead, every participant began by pointing out their own areas of growth. It is important for faculty to be aware that aspiring teachers are more likely to focus on negative aspects of their teaching. For example, in this study, there were almost ten times as many self-critical statements made by participants as compared to statements identifying areas of strength. Students may need help from their professors identifying areas of strength. Guiding questions could be included in required coursework which specifically ask students to reflect on areas of strength within the lesson, and by extension how these areas of strength could be further developed to maximize student learning.

Implications and Next Steps

As a result of this study, two changes are being made to the educator preparation program at the University in which this study took place. First, we are expanding the use of video based self-reflection so that more of our aspiring teachers are exposed to this model. Additionally, we are adding a near-peer feedback component in which students enrolled in our graduate educational leadership program will view video recordings of and provide feedback to aspiring teachers enrolled in our undergraduate educator preparation program. Because our educational leadership program only admits candidates who have experience as classroom teachers, this will create an opportunity for near-peer feedback.

As a pilot study, the authors acknowledge that the results of this study are not broadly generalizable. However, we believe the feedback from aspiring teachers within this study may be transferable to the experiences of aspiring teachers within other educator preparation programs who may be exposed to similar recording and subsequent self-critique. Video self-reflection may also be a useful tool for current practitioners who are interested in honing their craft as educators.

Schools can assist these teachers by providing time and resources to support teachers who are interested in such activities.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the benefits of using video recording and subsequent self-analysis as a means of promoting critical self-reflection among aspiring teachers. Participants in this study expressed initial fear of this model, which was consistent with previous studies. After overcoming this initial trepidation, participants focused on three areas of self-improvement: verbal/speech patterns; physical positioning; and paying attention to the needs of all students. The results of this study provide into the perspective of aspiring teachers regarding the usefulness of video based self-reflection as a tool to help them critically self-reflect on their practices as educators.

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