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AP to AP: The Transition from Assistant Principal to Associate Professor

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Abstract

This *Voices from the Field* submission reflects on my transition from a school-based teacher and administrator to the role of college professor. I discuss the similarities and differences in these positions and ways in which appropriate course instruction can influence student learning in a positive manner for students and faculty.

Keywords

higher education, school administration, community colleges, adult learning theory, online education

Introduction

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” In a defining moment, as a 17-year-old caring for a 6-year-old child with significant cognitive and physical disabilities, my dream of one day becoming a special education teacher became glaringly clear. Devon ignited my passion for supporting individuals with disabilities, and I am forever grateful for the time I spent with her, being even the smallest part of her milestones, and the significance she played in leading me to the field of special education. Now, in my 16th year as an educator, as I reflect on my career in education, I can say without hesitancy that each role I have served in has led me to and prepared me for my current role as an Associate Professor of Exceptional Student Education at Seminole State College of Florida.

My Background

I began my career in the field of education as an elementary school exceptional student education teacher. For 7 plus years, I served as a consultation teacher, resource teacher, support facilitation

teacher, and separate class teacher supporting students with varying exceptionalities ages 5-11 in Title I public schools. I then segued into the role of district elementary ESE program specialist. In this role, I supported various Title I and non-Title I elementary schools and stakeholders in meeting the needs of students with disabilities by providing professional development trainings, side-by-side coaching, collaborative problem solving using various data sources, and guidance with the reintegration of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). After serving in this role for 5 years, I transitioned into the role of elementary school assistant principal. Within this role, though I served in multiple capacities, I also served as our exceptional student education administrator. With 13 years of prior experience in the field of special education, serving as our ESE administrator was where I felt most at home; this was my wheelhouse. It was an honor serving faculty, staff, students, and families as an elementary assistant principal, and while my time as an administrator was brief, I am certain that the work I accomplished each day was meaningful and, in some way, contributed to the overall success of our school. Still, I felt most impactful when assisting faculty, staff, and families in supporting students with disabilities.

Consequently, when the opportunity to pursue a tenured track professorship in exceptional student education at Seminole State College of Florida presented itself, I felt compelled to take a leap of faith and move forward with the application process. With the encouragement and support of my professors at Stetson University, I completed the application process, and by June of 2022 was offered the position of Associate Professor of Exceptional Student Education. Even though it was tremendously bittersweet parting ways with the faculty, staff, students, and families of the elementary school where I found my way as an assistant principal, formed many meaningful relationships, and sincerely felt a part of our school family, in my heart, I knew that being a professor of special education was my calling. Moreover, with the launching of two new baccalaureate programs in Elementary Education (K-5) and Exceptional Student Education (K-12) at Seminole State College of Florida, I was eager to take part in pioneering these programs for bachelor's degree-seeking students, as well as share my enthusiasm for the field of special education with teacher candidates.

Bridging Real-World Practice to the Community College Campus

Approximately halfway through our Fall semester, it has become evidently clear that the real-world experiences I had in each of the former roles I held serve a significant purpose in my teaching of adults and teacher candidates. Currently, I teach EDF2005: Introduction to the Teaching Profession, EEX4601: Introduction to Behavior Management, and EEX4070: Teaching Exceptional Students; all asynchronous online courses. The student demographics in my courses vary widely, consisting of dual-enrollment students, first generation college students, mid-life adult students transitioning to a second career, students with disabilities requiring accommodations, neurotypical students, recent high school graduates who traditionally matriculated to their freshman year of college, part-time, and fulltime students. As a result, my students possess varying degrees of experience with engaging in online courses. Due to their experience with distance learning during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous students have voiced a preference for online learning. However, students with limited to no prior experience engaging in online coursework require explicit instruction in the use and navigation of

CANVAS, our learning management system. This explicit instruction is provided to all students during week 1 of my courses. College resources for effectively navigating and utilizing CANVAS are also readily available to students.

Just as I strived to lead by example as an ESE program specialist and elementary assistant principal, I strive to lead by example for the teacher candidate students I serve. It is crucial that our teacher candidates learn how to integrate technology, media, and differentiated instruction into their future classrooms to produce engaging and stimulating lessons for their students. Therefore, my course design and delivery intentionally align to these same principles. Dr. Gina Cicco, Assistant Professor of Counselor Education at St. John's University in New York, (2011), stated,

Instructors of online courses within teacher and counselor preparation programs may be the first role models for future educators on how to engage students of different ages and with varied learning-style preferences in the virtual classroom. Teachers of future teachers should be experts in pedagogy, and this translates to possessing a vivid recognition of the unique opportunities for learning that are available both in-class and asynchronously in online courses. These expert pedagogues, when embracing the possibility of advancing the profession through the online forum, should model the integration of technology, media, and differentiated instruction to produce engaging and stimulating lessons (p. 2).

Consequently, I adhere to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and ensure ALL students access to the course content by intentionally incorporating multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement within the course. Similarly, as an elementary school ESE teacher, it was imperative that when developing lesson plans, I strategically identified and removed barriers preventing my students from accessing curriculum and instruction; this was accomplished by means of differentiated, explicit, and systematic instruction combined with multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement with the established curriculum.

According to Abell et al. (2011), "UDL creates access for all students to curriculum, eliminates barriers to learning and provides alternatives for methods of instruction, delivery of instruction materials and student responses" (p. 172). Abell et al. (2011) further state that "...UDL places an emphasis on instructional materials that are designed in a way that allows students, regardless of ability, to engage, interact and learn from them" (p. 172). As an associate professor, my ultimate goal is to effectively design and deliver course content aligned to course objectives in a way that ensures ALL students, regardless of ability, the opportunity to engage, interact, and learn in an online format. Thus far, I have accomplished this by doing the following: creating a module overview including the topic, objectives, and related tasks; providing a weekly course outline; developing discussion board prompts that are relatable to ALL students; providing explicit, step-by-step numbered directions for engaging with the course content and completing assignments; providing examples and exemplars; providing a detailed rubric for each assignment and critical

task; and enhancing the course content from our textbook with exploration of and interaction with additional ancillary resources, including articles, videos, and websites. Students are ensured access to these resources through immersive reader (text-to-speech) and closed captioning. Further, I provide choice within assignments and submission methods. Students are also provided the opportunity to retake quizzes.

Reflections of Experience

While most of my previous teaching experience comes directly from the elementary school K-5 setting, as a district elementary ESE program specialist facilitating professional development trainings to paraprofessionals, general education, and ESE teachers, I trained adults with varying abilities and skillsets. Thus, to ensure that the strategies, methodologies, tools, and programs directly trained on would be implemented with fidelity by these paraprofessionals and teachers when they returned to their classrooms, it was imperative that these trainings be highly engaging. Hence, I made a concerted effort to adhere to the following principles of Malcolm Knowles's adult learning theory, "...adults need to know a reason that makes sense to them, for whatever they need to learn," "...adults enter a learning activity with a quality and volume of experience that is a resource for their own and others' learning," and, "...adults are ready to learn when they experience a need to know, or to be able to do something to perform more effectively in some aspect of their life" (Charungkaittikul & Henschke, 2018, p. 79). In accordance with these principles, (1) intended learning outcomes were introduced at the start of the training; (2) modeling as well as guided practice with the new learning was embedded throughout the training; (3) an explicit explanation for how this new learning should be implemented for the students within their classrooms was provided and discussed; (4) training participants were encouraged to share their experiences and best practices with those in attendance; and (5) the reasoning behind why the said strategy, methodology, tool, or program should be implemented was identified and supported by research-based evidence.

Correspondingly, the course content I design and deliver to my adult students must be both pedagogically and andragogically sound. As identified by Jillian Ruth Yarbrough (2018), professor at West Texas A & M University, to support innovative, advanced, online learning, adult learning theory must be adapted and incorporated into the course development and implementation (p. 2).

Equally, Dr. Richard B. Schultz (2012), coordinator of the Elmhurst College GIS Certificate Program, argues that "When this theory (adult learning theory) is integrated into the design of technology-based learning environments, it is possible to create lessons that not only serve the needs of students to use the latest technology, but also focus on their learning as an adult for their intended purposes" (pp. 49-50). This is precisely why I not only incorporate technology, multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement into my online courses, but I strategically align my course design and delivery to Malcolm Knowles's adult learning theory or andragogy.

Finally, serving as an elementary assistant principal afforded me the opportunity to spend abundant time in the classrooms of effective and highly effective teachers. By frequently conducting classroom walkthroughs, unannounced observations, and announced observations, I witnessed

best practices in teaching and high impact teaching strategies in action. Conducting teacher evaluations paved an avenue for me to provide meaningful feedback to teachers related to teaching and learning; this was delivered through the lens of both an instructional leader and coach.

Dr. Russell L. Herman, Assistant Chair, Undergraduate Coordinator, and Professor at University of North Carolina (2011), identifies numerous characteristics of an excellent professor. Herman specifically delineates that excellent professors must “Establish attainable goals. Be challenging, but within the students’ grasp, helping them along at points that turn out to be slightly more challenging than usual” (p. 3). Herman further argues that an excellent professor produces students who “...feel that we have high, but realistic, expectations for their success” (p. 5). My expectations for the teacher candidates I serve are high, as I hold them to the standard of the exemplar teachers I once served as an elementary assistant principal. Nonetheless, I will do whatever necessary and professionally within my power to support my students in meeting this standard. Their success equates to the success of their future students, and, all things considered, that is the overarching goal.

Conclusion

As my journey in K-12 education well prepared me for my new journey in higher education, I trust that my journey at Seminole State College of Florida will develop me into the excellent professor that Herman (2011) identifies, and the excellent professor that I sincerely strive to be. I hope that I aspire to continue to bridge the gap between college faculty and K-12 teaching and learning practitioners, as well as provide a positive and productive experience for the students we serve.

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