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Learning to manage complex teaching situations through modelling and reflection

Lilly Anne Litlabø¹

¹ Nordbygdo Lower Secondary School

At the start of every practicum period, the preservice teachers (PSTs) always have a couple of days for observation. During the observation period, various aspects of a teacher's role are highlighted, such as teaching a specific subject, carrying out teacher–student conversations, delivering specially adapted lessons, parent–teacher meetings, and so on.

In this paper, I focus on class management.

Class management is a blend of theoretical knowledge, experience, and improvisation. The ability to lead a group of students effectively is a key prerequisite for success as a teacher. There are no set strategies or solutions that will work in every situation. Class management involves preventing disruptions and choosing an appropriate response at the right moment. Teachers often need to act quickly and evaluate several situational factors on the spot.

Therefore, after a teaching session involving modelling, it is crucial to take some time to reflect upon how things went. These reflective conversations are in many ways similar to the classroom learning conversations the PSTs are struggling to lead.

Classroom learning conversations are planned and structured dialogues with learning as the central objective. Learning should be viewed broadly, encompassing academic, social, and personal development. It is essential that students actively participate in such conversations and help to shape and guide the conversations alongside the teacher. By thinking aloud and explaining their own understanding, they verbalise their learning, which enables them to influence their own learning process. During these conversations, the focus is on the process rather than performance. It is important to give students the time both to think and speak during these learning conversations.

I model for my PSTs how I use learning conversations as a tool, both in group settings with the students I teach, and during reflective discussions with the PSTs after the lessons.

In the reflection conversations with the PSTs afterwards, it is the PSTs themselves who should explore their thoughts and seek answers. As a practicum teacher, I try to guide the conversation by asking questions, listening, repeating answers, and allowing time for reflection before posing new questions. Few of these reflection questions have definite answers, but they are worth discussing, focusing on how a PST acted, and what could have been done differently. By asking critical questions and justifying one's choices, one develops a professional identity. Our core beliefs and values play a significant role

in this process. Mentalisation – the ability to continuously try to understand the students’ perspectives from the inside while simultaneously reflecting on oneself and one’s practice from the outside – is key in the teaching profession.

In this context, I will provide an example of a modelling session where I initiate a lesson with a group of 24 students. Three PSTs join me as observers during this session. Following the lesson, my intention is to engage in a reflection conversation with the PSTs. Prior to the session, I have prepared relevant questions to facilitate the discussion, but I am aware that some degree of improvisation will likely be necessary.

It’s morning, so it’s time for the first lesson. I feel calm and smile as I prepare, connecting my computer to the board and gathering books, notes, and other materials. Some students appear dazed, while others joke, smile, engage playfully, and jostle their way to their seats. A couple of students pass by, whispering private messages to me, to which I respond quietly.

Once I am ready to start, I stand in front of them and wait for the students to settle down, calm themselves, and focus. This process takes some time. As I scan the room, my gaze lingers on the uncertain and disruptive students. I smile at them and observe. Today, this approach is sufficient to create a peaceful and focused atmosphere. I greet the students as they take their seats. I then take the roll call, addressing a warm welcome to each of the students. The atmosphere in the room is calm and warm, which is precisely how I want it to be.

After the modelling session, I ask the PSTs reflection questions, such as:

- How did you perceive the atmosphere in the room?
- How do I approach class management?
- What contributes to building the atmosphere in the room?
- What would a verbal reprimand towards the disruptive students have resulted in during this situation?
- Would I have been able to manage any ‘verbal misbehaviour’ had it occurred?

Practicum teachers can model attitudes, values, and good strategies for their PSTs. Through the reflection conversations following the teaching sessions, they can provide a metaperspective on the modelling. During planning and preparation, practicum teachers can model by sharing ideas about classroom

management and learning, as well as exemplifying teaching in a learning session.

Modelling can also occur during the active teaching phase, when the practicum teacher engages in supervising and guiding the PSTs.

Through modelling, we mentor PSTs, but mentoring can also come in the form of sound advice and assistance with the structure of a session.

In the following example, I focus on how the need for mentoring can manifest differently based on the PSTs' preparation, their personalities, and the specific group of students they encounter.

The example is from teaching in mathematics as an outdoor activity. Three PSTs led the session, after planning it as a group. The session was designed to last 45 minutes and was implemented for three different groups of 24 students over the course of three days. Because the sessions were spread across three different days, we had the opportunity to facilitate a reflection conversation between each session.

The topic of study was geometry, with a particular emphasis on the circle. Key concepts for the session included the circle, centre, arc, radius, diameter, circumference, and Pi. The general outline for the session was as follows:

- Start of class: Gather focus and conduct health checks. Roll call.
- Initiate learning conversation and activate prior knowledge among the students.
- Make certain that everyone comprehends what they are doing and receives training on how to use the materials.
- Practical task: Use a wire and a measuring stick to measure the circumference and diameter of at least three circular objects, recording the measurements found. Then, divide the circumference by the diameter. What kind of numbers do you obtain as an answer? This approach leads to an exploration of Pi, fostering a learning conversation about this unique concept. Everyone can contribute to the discussion, as each student has a role in carrying out the tasks.
- Summary of the session where the students explain the concepts they encountered, discuss what they contributed, and reflect on what they learned. This type of positive conclusion optimises the overall experience of the session.

In our school area, there is a large, circular stone that is polished on top, resembling a table. The session started by gathering around this stone. The students were slow to exit the building. The PST assigned to lead the session complained that time was slipping away. He could not wait and jumped into the activity before establishing focus and calm.

It was challenging to capture what the PST said, and the students' eyes began to wander. Some giggled, leading to a little unrest. Several students challenged the PST verbally. As a result, the PST had to restart and spend energy on regaining focus from multiple distractions. It improved somewhat, but focus was never entirely recovered.

The PST began with an uncertain and somewhat awkward usage of mathematical terms. He said rounding instead of circle, middle instead of centre, and edge instead of arc. He also failed to offer any clarification by demonstrating clearly what the terms meant on the large circular stone that we were all standing around. The introduction and review of the topic felt rather lacklustre.

Once the students were given the practical task and were in motion, I took the opportunity to provide some mentoring to the PST. Allocating time for a thorough summary was vital to ensure the effectiveness of this session. In the summary, the PST had to show a firm grip on all the terms he used, and all terms had to be clearly illustrated on the stone so that the connection between the stone and the terms was evident. This was the goal of the session.

The learning session did not unfold as the PST had envisioned. This provided a solid foundation for a reflection conversation with the PST. There are no straightforward answers, but wisdom is gained through experience, reflection, and discussion.

My questions for the conversation were as follows:

- What can I do to ensure that students arrive at the designated area at the right time and have the necessary equipment?
- What strategies can be employed to gather focus within the group?
- How can I prevent unrest and focus on disruptive students?
- Is there a difference between conducting a learning session outdoors compared to indoors? If so, what are those differences, and what implications do they have for us as educators?
- How does language shape our teaching and our identity as individuals?

- How can we maintain the integrity of a session, ensuring that we keep focus from start to finish?

The second time the session was conducted, the students were present at the designated time. Did this relate to the fact that the information about the programme was communicated clearly, both on our digital platform and schedule, as well as verbally during the previous session, or was it simply because this was a different group of students? In any case, the students quickly settled down and were directed by the second PST.

This time, correct use of terms and exemplifications were in place, but the learning conversation was difficult to get going. The students provided little feedback and appeared reluctant to think aloud. This made the PST seem insecure, leading her to rush through the session. She asked questions and responded relatively quickly to them herself. The students were supposed to be contributing. The PST appeared stressed about the lack of student involvement in the learning conversation. She presented the practical aspects of the task and asked the students to work without defining a time limit, specifying the number of measurements, or stating the distance from the gathering point. The students set off with determined enthusiasm.

I seized the opportunity to offer some guidance to the PST: Allow ample time for summaries and give the students time to think. You should expect responses! After group work in which everyone has actively participated, one can also approach the groups and ask them directly. The students should articulate the relevant content and draw connections between the concepts!

Some students had made significant efforts to complete the assignment, so we struggled a bit to find them and bring them back for the session. The PST excelled in summarising the session and engaged the students effectively by asking the groups directly. Together, they managed to highlight some important points.

The session posed several challenges for PST number two. Therefore, a new round of conversation, reflection, and discussion was in order.

My questions for the reflection conversation were as follows:

- What is required for a productive learning conversation?
- How can I support insecure, particularly introverted, students so they feel comfortable using their voices and participating in a learning conversation?
- What characterises a good learning conversation?
- What contributes to creating a sense of security and a safe environment within a group of students?
- How does limiting an activity's time, the number of measurements, and the distance impact us?
- What do I gain as a class leader by clearly establishing boundaries?

In total, this session was conducted three times. Here, I have chosen to describe two of them. All the PSTs led the session. We reflected together, and the PSTs received mentoring between each enactment. Knowledge and awareness likely increased after each reflection conversation but proved difficult to implement directly into practice as other challenges emerged. Both the different PSTs and groups of students, of course, created differences in context. In the last learning conversation, the PSTs showed ownership of many of the points that had surfaced throughout the process.

