First Step: A Práctica Docente Student Tutoring Program
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Introduction

Standing in front of a real classroom for the first time is a scary experience. The same is true of doing micro-teaching in a Práctica Docente classroom. An excellent way to alleviate this fear is to have Práctica Docente students spend a semester doing individualized tutoring sessions with students who are studying English. This provides Práctica Docente students with the opportunity to practice-teach first, without having to deal with stage fright at the same time.

The Universidad de Quintana Roo in Chetumal, Mexico has a five-year Licenciatura program in Lengua Inglesa. Students study the English language throughout the ten-semester program. In addition, during the last five semesters of the program they begin preparation to become English teachers, taking courses such as Philosophy of Education, Educational Technology, Methodology and Techniques of Teaching English, and Elaboration of Materials. During semesters 9 and 10 they take Práctica Docente I and II. As the course names imply, these subjects are very practical, allowing the students to put into practice everything that they have learned during the courses of the English language major. The Práctica Docente courses give students the chance to develop professionally and the opportunity to actually practice teaching skills.

During Práctica Docente I, students are required to participate in a tutoring program and observe classes in the Centro de Enseñanza de Idiomas. During the two Práctica Docente seminars each week, students discuss what they have observed and learned through the tutoring and observation experiences. As the semester progresses, students do some micro-teaching during the seminars. In their tenth and final semester, students take Práctica Docente II. This course requires students to do several different micro-teaching segments during the seminars, as well as to observe classes and assist classroom teachers in primary, secondary and preparatory institutions in the community.

Project history

The tutoring program was first started in 1999 when Práctica Docente students began tutoring a group of village-based eco-tourism guides in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Since that time, the program has expanded to include the tutoring of Lengua Inglesa students who are in the early stages of learning English, as well as tutoring students from other majors who are taking obligatory English courses in the Centro de Enseñanza de Idiomas of the university.

Objective:

The rationale behind this program is to give Práctica Docente students the opportunity to teach one or two people at a time before they have to deal with typical classroom issues such as discipline, crowding, and hostile students. The tutoring experience also prepares Práctica Docente students to do individualized teaching which can be a good employment option to supplement a regular teaching salary.

Benefits

I have found that students enjoy this experience because, for many, it is the first time they really feel like teachers. They are able to put their knowledge to work and see the results of their years of university training. They become very excited and motivated to do an excellent job, and they are able to work on the development of their teaching skills in a relatively safe and comfortable environment.

The tutoring experience provides Práctica Docente students practice opportunities in giving clear directions, explaining grammar points, and becoming more comfortable with teaching in general. Plus, they become more familiar with books, materials, and supplemental activities which can make their lessons dynamic. The experience also helps them develop effective error correction techniques, as well as strategies to help students with pronunciation and communication problems. The Práctica Docente students learn firsthand about the planning and timing of activities. This practical experience helps prepare them for teaching in front of a classroom as they develop self-confidence, not only in their teaching skills, but in their English language skills as well.

Organization

The organization of this program has been very straightforward. At the beginning of each fall semester, teachers at the university make their English students aware of this tutoring opportunity, and those who are interested sign up to participate. The teacher in charge of the Práctica Docente program assigns one tutor (a Práctica Docente student) to one or two tutees. The tutors and tutees have an initial meeting during which they make a schedule to work together once a week during the semester. Usually, there are approximately 40 students taking the Práctica Docente I course. However, during some semesters there have been more than 40 students who have signed up to be tutored. On those occasions, I have assigned two tutees to one tutor, and this has actually worked out very well. It has provided food for thought as to whether two or three tutees with one tutor might not be wiser than a one-on-one arrangement. Not only does it reduce the problem of an absent student and hence a missed/cancelled session for the tutor, but it is also similar to having a small class.

What happens during tutoring sessions

The work done during tutoring sessions is that of general support and practice of what the students have been learning in their regular English classes. The sessions are not used for doing homework, but instead are used to teach and reinforce skills in which students have been having difficulties. In addition, the sessions are an opportunity for natural conversation in English in a private setting. Many tutees have stated that this was the first time they felt comfortable speaking in English.

Challenges

Attendance

In general, the program has gone smoothly and been highly successful, except for some problems with regular attendance. One reason for student absences has been due to motivational issues on the part of some individuals; another reason has been caused by busy schedules and time constraints. A third has stemmed from the voluntary nature of the program. These attendance issues in turn affect the continuity of the classes, as well as the enthusiasm levels of both tutors and tutees.

Committment, motivation, and scheduling of sessions

The motivational issue is one that needs to be examined. The program is intended to be a voluntary one; however, in some cases, teachers have told certain students that they must participate because of their low grades or other learning difficulties. This is not a pull-out from their regular class, but an extra session for these students, outside of regular class hours As would be expected, some of these individuals were not intrinsically motivated, and as a result did not regularly attend the tutoring sessions. Students who are pushed to participate may not be suitable candidates for this program, especially if they need to come to sessions during their free time. In examining this aspect, one possible solution was to have the sessions take place during regular class hours, with all students having a tutor; this would be a way for everyone to receive individualized tutoring attention, with the presence of the regular teacher as support and back-up. In other words, the tutoring sessions could be incorporated into the regular class hours, perhaps on a Friday to review what was learned during the week.

Generally speaking, the highly motivated students attended faithfully, yet even some of these individuals had attendance problems due to their busy schedules and other responsibilities. This may be another reason to have the sessions take place during regular class hours.

The Práctica Docente students and I looked closely at the absenteeism rate, and we decided to experiment with the concept of using contracts in the fall of 2006 in the hope of solving this problem. At the beginning of the semester, tutees had to sign contracts which obligated them to attend all sessions, except in the case of medical or family emergencies. However, the contracts seemed to have no obvious positive effect as they were not legally binding; in reality they didn't affect the commitment level of the tutees one way or the other.

Location

Because of the lack of available classrooms or free space at the university, there are very few locations on campus where tutoring sessions can be held. The cafeteria is too noisy, and the library is not a suitable location because of its silence policy of silence. Finding a good tutoring location has been a big problem.

Evaluation

Reflections

All the Práctica Docente students were required to hand in a reflective journal and lesson plan for each tutoring session. The lesson plans were helpful because this forced the tutors to focus on the structure of their lessons, the timing of the activities, and the search for effective ways to supplement and adapt the books the students are using in their classes.

The reflective journals have been excellent tools through which the tutors can reflect on what worked well and what didn't, as well as identify areas they need to work on. For example, many of the Práctica Docente students discovered that they had trouble giving clear and concise grammar explanations. Great improvements were made in this regard during the course of the semester.

Presentations

At the end of the semester, the students were required to make a final presentation during the Práctica Docente seminar. The tutors outlined all aspects of their tutoring work, including a description of their tutees' proficiency level and specific difficulties, the types of activities carried out, the resources used, and the problems which they faced. They also summarized the areas in which they, as tutors, had improved and those which needed more work. This type of experiential sharing was extremely useful as the students could identify universal problems and share solutions.

Summary

Overall, the Práctica Docente students found the tutoring experience to be exciting, gratifying, and fun. They felt that not only was it excellent preparation for the micro-teaching and classroom practice they would be doing in the second semester of Práctica Docente, but it also gave a big boost to the self-esteem of all those involved. In addition, it provided a positive benefit to the English-learning community of the university through the availability of free tutoring sessions to those interested.

Future changes as solutions to challenges

As mentioned earlier, absenteeism, commitment, and location have represented the biggest obstacles. Therefore, I have decided to try a new approach to the tutoring program during the fall 2007 semester in order to hopefully remedy these difficulties.

A former Práctica Docente student who participated in the first tutoring project in 1999 is now teaching in a local secondary school. She approached me to see if we could begin a tutoring project in two of her classes. With over forty students in each group, she would like to do something special to spice up these large classes, as well as offer remedial help at the same time. She said she is looking for a way to give her students special attention, particularly in the areas of speaking and writing. English is mandatory, but most of her students have no interest in learning the language. This situation seems like an excellent opportunity to explore various changes in the tutoring program, as well as to remedy location and absenteeism problems.

One change will be the number of tutees assigned to each tutor. In the fall 2007 semester, there are 30 Práctica Docente I students; they will be working with a total of 87 secondary school students, with one tutor assigned to two or three tutees. Therefore, in the case of the absence of a tutee, the tutor will not have gone to the session in vain. This should help to keep the motivation level of the Práctica Docente students high. In addition, because the sessions will be held during regular class hours at the secondary school, there will be no problem with missed sessions.

The issue of location will also be solved because the sessions will take place in the secondary school during the two regular Friday afternoon class times. Group A begins at 2:00, and Group B at 3:30; 15 Práctica Docente tutors will work with Group A, and 15 with Group B, each tutor being responsible for 2 or 3 students. In order to comfortably accommodate everyone, half of the groups will meet in the classroom, and the other half in the library. The principal of the school has been very supportive of the project and has offered the use of the library during these two hours.

Extending the tutoring program into the public school system is an exciting new challenge. It will be gratifying to see the results of offering this service in a secondary school setting where positive seeds of language learning need to be sown.