

Turning my classroom into a chemistry lab

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A teacher devoted to constant improvement is what I like to think of myself. Recently I have been involved in the exploration of the wonderful powers of our brains. At the same time, I was flabbergasted by the abyss between what students are being taught and what they actually end up learning. The invitation to teach at the summer school then caught me ready. From the first proposal for teachers, I knew exactly what needed to be done: spread the word of methodology of teaching; enlighten future teachers; empower students for their own lifelong learning; show them what can be done to make learning effective; show them how to gain more from studying than just a passing grade or an impressive grade point average. Doing this in an hour and a half? Well, at least give it a try.

This is a story of how I put that to work. As for the results and outcomes... well, let us not jump to the end of the story. Like any other blossoming writer (I love making jokes at my own expense) I prefer to keep my audience riveted until the very end.

There was a considerable amount of anxiety while I was thinking about the workshop. Sometimes having teaching experience does just that for you; it makes you aware of all the things that can go wrong. For one, I knew that there would be 25 students, knew their names and the countries from which they came. This was enough to start with, but not nearly enough to know exactly how to go about teaching them. Will they have had any education in the field of teaching English? English? Will they all have come from English departments or possibly other majors or other languages? And what if they come as fully prepared, doctoral students? What if their professional interests are not even close to being teachers? In addition to this, once I saw the program of the school, I thought that I would definitely be booted off the stage. Literature and cultural studies dominated the program, and I felt that I was missing the point. "Oh well" is what played in my head. Finally, I plucked up the courage and started planning my way into a happy teaching place.

I decided to start by presenting a novel idea to the students. I thought it might come as a shocker to today's generation: *teachers are not your mothers*. Having asked the first question, "What is learning," this major answer came to them all on its own. This bit was intended to get the students to realize that in order to be effective learners, they must be autonomous, self-reliant and responsible. As for me, standing in front of them, seeing their faces, communicating with them, I could finally relax and do what I do. Teach. Communicate. Encourage them to think. It was a good start.

Another one of my evil schemes for that morning session was to implement one more crazy idea: teachers and students are not engaged in a soccer match. There are no separate teams, no referees. There should be no foul play, either, just some rules, stamina, patience, and a long stretch of time to get to the same goal. Yes, we are on the same team, although our roles are quite different, and teachers get paid at the end of the month.

This summer school will indeed go towards that goal as well – employability – hopefully, the knowledge and experience the students gain will make them different from and better than other candidates once they apply for a job. Basically, that is the point of all education, to produce useful knowledge, readily applicable in the global job market. This brings us back to our main topic.

Readily applied knowledge implies that what we teach our students and what they learn is available for use, even outside the classroom and exam-type situations. Are those really the outcomes we are seeing? So, the students and I went on with our business in our little workshop where they were asked more silly questions such as, "What are grades and

why grade?” or “Should teachers be motivated?” and so on. Our classroom turned into a Petri dish. Apparently the students were proper nutrients, the questions asked were seeds sown, and life happened. One student’s answer provoked someone else’s; a rebuttal was shot back, provoking more response. Suddenly, there was a lively discussion which consumed the entire group. I stood there feeling great. Success! They were motivated and interested in further thinking about learning and teaching--for the moment, at least. After all, it is moments that count, moments that will collect and one day turn into a critical mass of experiences giving these young people their professional shape and form.

It was truly rewarding to listen to the students’ thoughts and beliefs, but most importantly, the conditions were met to go on with the chemistry experiment and show the students one of many steps they could take to improve their learning. These are the same steps they could use in the future to avoid becoming teachers who ask their students merely to memorize, reproduce or recognize. Demands must be higher; our brains need to be stimulated; the wheels must keep on turning. It takes practice and hard work to get there, to become an independent, creative, critical and efficient thinker. Soon enough, the students were constructing tests, solving puzzles and summarizing in one word texts from the fields of psycholinguistics, pragmatics and sociolinguistics. They were fully engaged, motivated and having fun. So, it is possible. Again, I am very pleased with US.

Hope remains that moments like this will truly be formative for the students’ development. I hope they will carry the demand to be cognitively stimulated back to their classrooms, whether they sit there as students or pace around as teachers. As for myself, I certainly have learned that having a bit of stage fright is extremely useful for me and that I should embrace the anxiety as a dear friend. My worries and questions played the key role of a wonderfully programmed GPS while I was travelling to my destination of teaching in the Maribor summer school. I did not get lost.