

REFLECTIVE LOG

I am learning all the time. The tombstone will be my diploma. Eartha Kitt

Teaching engages all senses, one's entire personality, patience, empathy and a good judgement; furthermore, creativity and clear communication of knowledge and tasks are required – all in all, a teacher orchestrates an array of hard and soft skills to shape an engaging learning environment. My log reflects four pivotal insights that I got from my first teaching experience in an English-speaking academic setting. First, sensitizing students to see love as the key driver for gaining knowledge opens the arena for a playful approach to learning. Second, students get motivated by a personal atmosphere and a learner-oriented approach. Third, collaboration and a well-balanced depth of content keep students mentally busy and engaged. Fourth, some challenges arise with respect to language as well as to academic meta-knowledge, such as literacy and style that can only be partly addressed in class. My assumption is that small group teaching can be approached as a hybrid function between teaching, facilitating, and mentoring by delivering deep knowledge that is well structured in a whole-hearted, caring class environment.

LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE

Teaching 1st and 2nd-year University students implies not only conveying course knowledge but also introducing that learning goes beyond high school practices. Seeing learning as a devotional practice is quite the contrary to a Foucauldian discipline that includes examination, judgement, and surveillance (Foucault 1980¹). In my first tutorial I played a game to carve out both principles and how they complement each other. As a result, we decided to approach learning as 'discipulus' (Latin for disciple or follower) of something we 'discipere' (Latin for 'embrace or grasp intellectually, analyze thoroughly', Etymonline). Seen this way, discipline has much less of a restrictive connotation to it and discovering learning from a voluntary perspective can be very liberating for students. However, it can also be quite intimidating, because such learning requires more self-determined creative thinking, self-motivation, and production. Andrew Metcalf and Ann Game stress the importance of 'love' for knowledge as a driving factor for learning. Love is seen as a relation to the object

¹ Disciplinary practices in Foucault's sense generate subjects and objects, through the production of cultural representations. Discipline restricts in the very act of constructing identity; discipline is power (Foucault 1980).

we encounter. The approach pledges for an impartial stance towards any kind of knowledge or material (Metcalf/Game 2011: 2-6), and thus to build a loving relationship with the task at hand. Elaborating further on this concept, Metcalfe and Game introduce monastic practice as a way to freedom in learning through surrender and persistency to self-set goals, seeing intrinsic satisfaction in following tasks through in a devotional manner, entering the realm of now, where time unfolds in a non-linear present (ibid.: 10). The ability to set goals for oneself and adhere to them can of course be traced back to a learned self-disciplinary behavior in a Foucauldian sense. Since such behavior is ingrained from a very early age on, it becomes a habitus (cf. Bourdieu) and will naturally underlie most learning practices. Hence a combination of discipline and devotional practice is suitable for mature learners as well as younger students. In class, there is not enough time for such deep immersion, however, I found that sensitizing students to approaching learning with devotion gave a positive outlook on what is otherwise perceived as a chore.

ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION

Students might not always be intrinsically interested or alert, which I addressed by empathy, playful learning and by being a person. I found that showing empathy for the student's situation (which semester, how many subjects, the social life in the city and on campus, making new friends, having family far away etc.) enables deeper communion with the group and individuals. Of course, a teacher of a larger group cannot possibly understand and know all this, however, I had positive feedback whenever I made use of the dynamics I observed with individuals as well as within the group. Students felt acknowledged and hence co-created a fun learning environment. Such a learner-oriented approach can both help dealing with resistance and engage students by a sense of belonging and ownership (cf. Weimer 2002). Moreover, in the case of first year students, games and puzzles are a great way of engaging. Not only do they get to know their peers better, they also speak among equals, which takes away some fear to speak up. A reciprocal teaching environment, in which students find a mentor in their teacher, has the advantage of engaging students, making them responsive to a person they trust. I believe that being affable and open, e.g. admitting mistakes or not knowing certain things, has more positive effects on students than that it potentially causes a loss of authority. Drawing on personal experiences does not only lower the teacher-student barrier, it also helps students to feel less intimidated by obstacles when they realize that all learners (and teachers) struggle at times. Ramsden states: 'Good

teaching and good learning are linked through the students' experience of what we do. It follows that we cannot teach better unless we are able to see what we are doing from their point of view' (Ramsden 2003: 84 cited in Baik: 10). Important, from my personal experience, is nonetheless counterbalancing a lax atmosphere with clear rules, consistency, and setting boundaries when needed, putting on my strict face.

COLLABORATIVE STRATEGY

In order to structure classes and balance 'play' and 'discipline' (cf. Metcalfe/Game, Foucault), some tactics and strategy help improving the quality of teaching. As my immediate experience is small group teaching, some approaches were a) structuring complex topics, b) making students discuss in pairs and collect answers afterwards (helps overcoming fear of saying something wrong), c) encouraging to question authors and search for alternative views, d) identifying and triggering likely misconceptions and clarify them, e) starting with what students know and build on it, f) stepping back regularly and make sure content and form follow goals still (for some cf. Biggs and Tang 2007: 25). Small groups allow interaction to build relationships that can result in better working group experiences, i.e. when students prepare facilitations. In a feedback round my students said that these group sessions were valuable and fun, particularly in terms of solving difficult texts in team work, putting them in simple language. Thus, learning was enjoyed when experienced as less competitive and more collaborative (cf. also Baik: 10). A comradely environment is perceived as non-threatening and fruitful. Another challenge is to find the right level of complexity and depth for the students that is just right, neither too demanding nor too easy. Asking students for their opinion, sometimes probing with questions helps the teacher getting a feeling for the overall level of understanding. If the balance of atmosphere, learning and interaction is right, students are more likely to enjoy class, attend regularly, participate actively, and be motivated to deliver good work (also cf. Cannon/Newble 1989: 43).

CHALLENGES

During my tutorials I noticed challenges in mainly four areas. First, language barriers (teaching/learning in a second language) can hinder progress in many ways, for example, when explaining complex matters or when there is a need to interrupt a student or student facilitation. There are cultural subtleties that are difficult to manage when criticizing

students' works. Another difficulty is recalling class from group works and coming up with jovial ice-breakers or jokes, which is otherwise a useful quick trick to lift spirits when a topic becomes too heavy or a discussion stalls. I found that simple Why-and-How-questions are sometimes a way out, as long as they refer to knowledge that is on the surface at that given point in time, so students feel confident to answer (cf. Baik: 21). A third problem throughout the entire course was handling the different interpretations of assessments and tasks set by the course teachers. Responding by double-checking with the course teacher and write emails to my students proved to be the quickest way to solve such problems. Fourth, difficulties with academic writing and referencing could not be addressed in depth in tutorials due to limited time to cover even our basic topics. Although I am more than happy to help and give recommendations, I'm afraid the priority of teaching content outweighs endeavors to teach academic writing in class. In this case, referring students to the UNSW Learning Center was of great value. Nonetheless, I encouraged students to send me drafts, and I commented on their first assessments in a way they can use for their next writings. Moreover, I wrote a two-page document on common mistakes or style-pitfalls and handed them out.

CONCLUSION

My reflection covers several aspects of teaching that are far from being comprehensive and I expect to refine my methods with experience. Notable aspects of my early stage teaching are a learner-oriented approach, using empathy, stressing a playful approach to learning as framing engagement strategy that builds on collaboration, in which I provide the right depth and complexity of knowledge and ensure a right mutual understanding. 'Wounded healer' comes to my mind (with a wink) when I think about my role in the course. Although the term is not fully adequate, it still bears some truth. I suppose many young teachers draw a great deal on their own experiences with both bad and exceptional teachers they encountered themselves. Then while teaching you learn through interaction with students and start shaping the style that fits your personality best. 'Teacher-facilitator-mentor' appears to be a compound that encompasses the role I would like to perform. Besides teaching what is on the agenda, my core pursuit – on a meta-level – is to mutually broaden horizons by correcting, balancing, and complementing knowledge that is provided by either a text, a student, or teachers. Ideally, I am my students' first point of academic contact, which includes managing my teaching persona as being affable and caring. I am also indebted to

share a depth of knowledge that is enriching for all students. That's why my role also includes developing a passion for any topic I am teaching by adding value with my own extensive readings and personal experiences. All in all, I have two main goals that fit the tactics and strategies of my teaching. First, I hope to get my students to work bottom-up and top-down, flip the coin, question logic, accept paradox, see the bigger picture, in other words, develop good academic literacy. Second, I want to set a good example how to work academically sound, so the students themselves find a language to articulate complex ideas and juxtapose authors in order to come up with well balanced arguments.

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