

Challenging the Lecture Format in Traditional Teacher Education-Using Pictorials for Collaborative/Experiential Learning

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Abstract

Many professors deliver their course material by using the traditional lecture format as the students take notes. Research shows that learning is more apt to take place by self-discovery, as well as experiential methods of teaching, and it is not unusual to witness these methods carried out in the elementary schools. It is more uncommon, however, to see a university professor using these same methods. This article describes one TESOL professor's method of collaborative learning as she introduces pre-service teachers to a world of discovery-learning as they explore methodologies and approaches to language teaching through group-work, and are assigned to depict their understanding of the material in pictorials. Students are disoriented at first, and many are uncomfortable without the established parameters of "chalk and talk". The task proves to be an interesting experiment as the learners challenge traditional methods of learning, and broaden their understanding of classroom learning and teaching styles.

The statue of liberty stands in the New York harbor, beckoning to the masses that reflect the immigrant and non-native-English-speaking population in the United States today. What Lady Liberty fails to address is the problems that ensue as the approximately 3,452,073 (National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1998) English-learning children sit side-by-side in the general education, public school classroom with native English-speaking children, trying to learn the same material

in the same way as the native English-speakers.

It is probably safe to generalize by stating that the average teacher in this country is Caucasian, female, native English-speaking, and possesses little expertise in teaching individuals of cultures other than the mainstream, and who speak languages other than English. The instructor will naturally teach according to the style his or her familiar framework dictates. Herein lies the problem: English language learners learning through content area, must be taught using specific strategies that will make the material comprehensible. As a result of this fact, the nation has passed several laws throughout history mandating that all students receive comprehensible instruction (e.g., Lau vs Nichols, 1974.) Unfortunately, all too often these laws have been ignored, and, some advocacy group sues the state or school district to uphold those mandates.

Florida, a state with a minimum estimated population of 288,603 English learners (National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1998), obliges its public school elementary teachers to be prepared to teach all language minority students, and therefore, every public school general education elementary teacher must be ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Language) endorsed. All incoming public school students complete a Home Language Survey upon registering where the parent or guardian must indicate if a

language other than English is spoken at home. If so, that student's classroom teacher must complete a 300-hour inservice training program, or undertake a series of five 3-credit graduate courses that will culminate in an ESOL endorsement. These mandatory courses include the components of first and second language acquisition, ESOL principles, strategies, and methodologies of second language teaching and learning. Since this mandate has been in place, problems have arisen when veteran teachers who were not ESOL certified or endorsed were suddenly forced to take courses to learn how to teach language minority students in spite of having taught those children for years. One can only imagine the potential for resentment some teachers might have felt with regard to this policy.

At a large, rapidly growing university in South Florida, the teacher education program has taken steps to eliminate this problem by becoming the only public institution of higher learning in the state to offer a unique program that allows teachers to graduate with a built-in ESOL endorsement. By taking the courses "Introduction to TESOL" at the beginning of their teacher education program, and "TESOL Issues and Strategies" just before they student teach, preservice teachers are well-grounded in the basics of TESOL, language acquisition, and methodologies of teaching limited English proficient students. Additionally, preservice teachers must demonstrate lesson plan modifications and offer strategies for non-native English speakers in the lesson plans they present in all other methods and materials courses, including Introduction to Diversity, Multicultural Education, and Special Education courses in the College of Education teacher education program.

A large percentage of the teacher education students are non-traditional; they have been in the work force, have families and children they need to care for, and have had rich life experience. Usually, they are not recent high school graduates but have completed associate degrees or have transferred from other colleges. Some are returning students who need to refresh their skills for today's workforce.

Since the "Introduction to TESOL" course is one of the first courses taken in the teacher education program, teachers of this course have the job of exposing the preservice teachers to alternative teaching methodologies. Collaborative projects, group work, peer teaching, and any strategy other than the straight lecture format serve to broaden the intellectual horizons of these university students who are comfortable, yet unchallenged by that traditional, but antiquated, teaching method.

Typically, the students are most accustomed to having the teacher lecture while they take notes. Their evaluations have usually been through multiple choice tests with traditional midterms and finals. However, students can take more responsibility for their learning if teachers create student-centered classrooms through interactive activities. By using a variety of hands-on methods, and by exposing these university students to the new realm of cooperative and collaborative activities, multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993a) are exercised, students discover creativity they never knew they possessed, and the teacher's role becomes more of a facilitator than a "depositor of information" (Freire, 1990).

Although this professor uses these techniques described in this article for

teaching language methodology, any material can be taught in more innovative ways than simply lecturing. To encourage more creative thinking, students may be assigned to groups for any number of purposes. For example, to learn about current language teaching methodologies, teacher education students were assigned to choose one method and translate it into some pictorial form. Students were divided into groups of three or four, and were provided with large pieces of poster paper, colored markers, tape, and the following directions:

1. As a group, choose a language teaching methodology that is interesting to you.
2. Using pictures, symbols, words, graphs, charts, etc., make a pictorial that shows a language teaching method.

The first reaction is always of bewilderment. "What do you mean?" "Can we use anything?" "Can we do it like this...?" as the students begin to synthesize the instructions. "How will these be graded?" is a huge issue, because they are hesitant to take a chance with their grades. Since this is a group activity, it is counted as class participation. If it were to be graded as an assignment, it could be extremely unfair because the task is subjective and the instructions are ambiguous. This vagueness is intentional because if the directions are rigidly detailed, it obstructs the students' liberty to think without the fetters of previous assignments and preconceived ideas. When the students are trusted to come up with their own ideas, the presentations are infinitely more clever and imaginative.

The students are momentarily stunned when they realize this assignment cannot

be done wrong. However they choose to depict the methodology, it is "correct" as long as it comes directly from them. After debating among themselves for a short period of time about how they will start, what they are going to do, and who is going to do what task, group members settle into their roles. Tasks include providing input, writing, drawing, labeling, coloring, or providing the mechanical input such as folding, stapling, cutting, hanging, and so forth. When finished, they display the artwork on the walls for the entire class to see. Each group shares the meaning of their work and answers questions from their classmates.

Students are assigned this task in each TESOL class, and it is fascinating to see the mental transformations that transpire as they progress from bewilderment, to a germ of an idea. It is very difficult for these university students to complete this task, as they are asked to do something totally unfamiliar, with no specific rules to follow, and with no apparent cognitive meaning. These participants are beginning teacher education students who are primarily accustomed to only one way to teach- the teacher fronted lecture. Some individuals complain that they are not artistic and cannot draw. After being told they do not have to draw and can use any style of depiction, they begin to exercise their capabilities and do indeed show their individual artistic abilities.

The benefits of this assignment are many, both for the student and the instructor. The preservice teachers learn that each individual brings his or her own schemata to the task and they are forced to stretch their minds to see a principle in a different modality (or intelligence), instead of only words. They experience working collaboratively in a group as some

individuals naturally assume leadership roles, as others receptively follow along. Some contribute their artistry, while others fall into roles reflecting their real life personalities, such as leader, follower, collaborator, loner, evaluator, critic, and onlooker. No one wants to be thought of as not being collegial because they will see each other class after class throughout the program. Consequently, everyone feels obliged to contribute to the success of the project. The preservice teachers become familiar with one another, as they are reminded of what it feels like to be expected to complete an ambiguous task. The salient benefits of this exercise are immediately evident as the instructor has the chance to feel the excitement through the students' enthusiasm, as well as experience a momentary respite from lecturing (which can be a principal cause of mental burnout from giving the same repetitive lecture). With this technique, the instructor gets the chance to know and interact with the students individually while visiting each group. It is inspiring to see the students' renditions of material the instructor has presented as their mental images are transformed into physical representations through their pictorials.

In asking the university students to evaluate this task, their responses are mostly positive. "It was fun to work in a group because I could not have done this myself." "I enjoyed seeing what other people's conceptions of a methodology were." "This was new for me. I am going to try this with my students." "This would be a great way to get language minority students to become interactively involved." "I liked experimenting with new ways of teaching. It was a relief from a lecture." "I got to see how other people approach a task and think."

Negative comments were from individuals who were uncomfortable with the ambiguity of the task instructions, were more comfortable with a lecture-style class, or did not understand the format. "This made no sense. I felt it was a waste of time." "I get more out of a lecture." "I don't like working in groups." "I felt like this was play time." "This was busy work with no meaning."

The negative comments imply that perhaps the students did not understand the significance of group work, and maybe they need more "learning training" (Hoejke, 93-94). If students don't understand why they are doing something, they won't see the value of the task (Scarcello & Oxford, 1992). However, it could also imply that the teacher education student new to teacher training has not yet been exposed to the more recent methods of classroom methodologies and needs to be updated. But even though some might not have liked the exercise, being a critical mass that could almost become a de facto cohort as they go through the teacher education together undoubtedly encouraged the more reluctant students to participate in the activity.

Although this teaching method is used specifically for learning language methodologies, the process can be adapted and modified for almost any subject matter, including ESL students. Groups may be assigned to study and present (as experts) a chapter, or even a paragraph with more difficult material, to teach their classmates. The same method can be employed to present a scientific experiment, or a math problem (or even as a get-to-know-you icebreaker as the students interview each other). Presenters can create overhead transparencies, handouts, charts, poster sessions, or works of art. Possibilities are

unlimited and only require an open imagination.

By engaging novice preservice teachers in hands-on activities, they are exposed to a wide variety of teaching and learning styles that challenge their previous mindsets and teaching assumptions. As a direct result of these new experiences, their personal reflections take on a new depth, they encounter personal challenges, and sensitivity toward English language learners is increased.

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