On Engaging Students:
What I Learned From One of my Biggest Teaching Mistakes

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Abstract:

A reflective exploration of one's teaching mistakes can assist colleagues in avoiding similar missteps and in acknowledging that learning to teach is a lifelong pursuit. This piece describes a critical examination of a particular challenge in the author's teaching and how her practices changed over time.

Key Words:

Pedagogy, task-based instruction, TBI, TESL.

Introduction

In Neuhaus's (2015) editorial she urges educators to reflect on and publicize their teaching mistakes. According to Neuhaus, such reflection helps colleagues avoid similar missteps and enhances their teaching effectiveness. To further Neuhaus's point, the public examination of pedagogical challenges provides a more realistic portrayal of the intricacies of teaching. An informed glimpse into what happens or does not happen in our classrooms is essential to decreasing pedagogical solitude (Shulman, 1993). Additionally, a clear depiction of the messiness of teaching can better inform how we train and support those in and through the profession. Such guidance is particularly crucial for college faculty who may not receive sufficient teacher training. In this piece, I heed Neuhaus's call through an exploration of one of my teaching mistakes as well as how I addressed these challenges.

The Mistake

As a new teacher, I failed to engage students in the process of learning. While I crafted lesson plans packed with concepts to cover and activities to complete, my plans did not translate into the classroom where I worked far harder than my students did. As I covered concepts essential to students' understanding of the discipline, time 'dragged its feet'. Few students took notes. Others appeared politely attentive, but most stared straight ahead, their eyes fixed on a moment in the future when class would be over. Those less discrete would stare at poorly hidden cell phones or pass notes. Meanwhile, I was at the board, explaining a concept of high importance and interest to me and of little importance and interest to them. After even the most spirited lecture, which left my brow damp and my hands chalked, I was never wholly certain if students had learned what I aimed to teach. I had no proof one way or the other. As of yet, I was not aware that I could better design my class to enhance student engagement as well as their learning.

While lectures left students listless, in-class activities converted students into a mass of uncontrollable energy. Having students talk to a partner or break into groups to discuss the reading resulted in irreparable chaos. There was no limit to the procedural questions that would arise: *Who talks first and for how long? Should we write it all down? Our group has three people not four. Is that ok? Do we have to do this right now?* With all of these questions, students were more engaged than during a lecture. In this case, however, more engagement did not equate with more learning. In fact, students focused most of their energy on executing the activity appropriately rather than applying knowledge and developing their linguistic skills. The period often closed with activities unfinished and questions unanswered. It became clear that this style of teaching was not tenable for me or my students. Something would have to change.

Task-based Instruction

I was fortunate enough to learn about task-based instruction (TBI) early in my career. This method was designed for language classrooms, where students acquired a language through the completion of linguistic tasks (e.g., asking for directions, making a phone call). While developed for language learning (Ellis, 2003), the structure of TBI

can increase student engagement in other disciplines. TBI begins with a pre-task, in which the teacher delineates the requirements of the task. The pre-task is followed by the task, in which students complete an activity with a partner or group while the teacher serves as a guide. The final step is the review, in which students share the results of the task and give peers feedback. The length of these steps can vary depending on the task. It is possible to complete several short tasks per class period or to complete a more involved task over the course of multiple periods.

TBI supplied the daily course-level organization necessary to promote student engagement. If I followed a brief lecture with the three-step TBI structure, students paid closer attention to information they would soon have to apply. The pre-task served to define the task and clarify expectations. The subsequent tasks were student-centered, and I could observe which aspects of the language students had acquired. Exactly what students learned or had not yet learned was immediately on display. The final review step allowed students to act as peer models as they demonstrated their learning. Over time, I realized that the success of a task largely depends on a cohesive pre-task, and I developed a list of information that each pre-task should contain.

How I Format a Pre-task

During the pre-task for any given activity, I outline the following:
1) the task,
2) the product,
3) the numbers (of people, of minutes, of products), and
4) the debrief.

I display these steps on a PowerPoint slide or on the board so that students can reference them. The task entails what students will do. Will they talk to a partner or group? Will they answer questions? Will they brainstorm topics for their research papers? I determine the specific actions I would like students to engage in and make them as concrete as possible. In its simplest form, the task portion of an activity often reads like a list of verbs: *discuss, answer, write*.

The product is the outcome of the task and serves as evidence that the task has been completed. For example, the product might be a post-it note with a group-written thesis sentence or a list of research topics. If the task is a list of verbs, the product is a list of nouns (e.g., a post-it, a list). Making the product explicit directs the energy and focus that students assign to the task. Without a definitive outcome, students might occupy themselves with insignificant details at the expense of engaging with the discipline.

Once I describe the task and product, I cover numbers, such as the number of people in a group or how much time is allotted. When I first used the TBI method, I began my pre-task with information about numbers, assuming they were the most essential: *In groups of three, you will have 5 minutes to*.... However, I found that beginning with numbers often increased the collective anxiety in the room. Students were so consumed with forming their preferred group and finishing within the time constraints that they did not pay much attention to the task or product. For this reason, the "numbers" information follows task and product details.

Finally, students need to know what form the debrief will take. Will they discuss their thesis sentence with another group? Should they be prepared to share their list of topics with the class? Telling students how they will share their work and demonstrate their learning increases their focus on creating an exemplary product.

Research has consistently shown the benefits of increased course structure as well as activity structure. Enhanced structure increases the number of significant learning experiences in which students are actively engaged in constructing their own understanding of a discipline (Fink, 2013). It also increases equity by creating spaces in which all students are able to participate (Tanner, 2013). Additionally, increased structure has been shown to reduce the achievement gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students (Haak, Hillerislambers, & Pitre, 2011).

Discussion

The application of TBI prompted me to reinterpret the occurrences in my classroom and re-conceptualize the notion of engagement. I started teaching with the lecture method. This decision was based on the assumption that my interest in the material and my lively presentation could captivate any audience. This interpretation of lecturing did not motivate student participation nor did it make student learning apparent. What I came to realize was that students need time in order to engage. A traditional lecture, no matter how intriguing the topic or animated the presenter, does not provide such time. Students need a pause: to analyze the content with peers, to discover points of understanding, and to uncover confusion. To be engaged, students need to do tasks in the discipline. TBI supported my creation of an atmosphere in which students could engage with the material and each other.

Before the application of TBI, my activities devolved into innumerable questions. Students were more involved during these rapid-fire question sessions than during a lecture. But they were not meaningfully engaged. The students' behavior resulted from my failure to give clear instructions. Since students did not know the reasoning behind the activities, they focused on insignificant but controllable details (e.g., who talks first, when to start). Without knowing what they might be asked to do next, students were preparing for every possible contingency. Their questions aimed to ensure they would have things written (if necessary), have the right number of participants (in the event that), and the right amount of participation (just in case). A purposeful pre-task addressed these questions upfront, thus reducing confusion. With specific guidelines students knew where to focus their efforts and how those efforts would be shared with the class. The detailed pre-task also demanded that I carefully consider what I was asking students to do and why. If I was unable to determine what aspect of students' learning I wanted them to demonstrate, I had to redefine the task or rethink it altogether.

Learning to engage students is a career-long endeavor. Thus far, I have examined my assumption that a lengthy lecture would naturally stimulate and entice students. To be engaged, students need to participate in authentic tasks that help them develop the skills necessary to work in a discipline. To enhance student engagement, I modified my class with TBI, and shortened my lectures. These changes increased involvement and created a supportive environment where student learning was made visible.

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