

TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF INTERESTING, EFFECTIVE, AND ENGAGING TEACHING: A CASE STUDY OF 4 COLLEGE PROFESSORS

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Teachers use different strategies to improve students' learning. To learn more about the crucial aspects of making learning effective for students, we conducted a qualitative case study with four professors. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews, each lasted 30 minutes. The conversations were audio-taped and transcribed within five to ten days of data collection. The analyses of the transcriptions were conducted using constant comparative method. The participants had varied views, yet they agreed that a good teacher must focus on learning; consider various aspects of students' personal development including their cognitive, social, and emotional development; and take care of different student learning styles, for example, visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

Keywords: Effective teaching, Learning, Interactive engagement, Case study

INTRODUCTION

Teacher's ability to make learning interesting in class is vital to ensure and maintain students' attention (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Teachers' views about the role of interactive engagement can help enrich the knowledge and understanding of effectively engaging students in learning process. To explore the role of interactive pedagogy and teachers' views of it, we conducted a qualitative case study (Creswell, 2007). We interviewed four professors using a semi-structured interview protocol and observed their in-class teaching. Our conversations with the professors and in-class observations highlighted the characteristics of the strategies they used to engage students in meaningful learning.

The purpose of the face-to-face interviews was to investigate the hidden characteristics of the professors' views in enhancing learning through effective teaching. Our conversations provided a deeper insight into the four participants' views on the nature of interactive engagement. Various other aspects of the classroom teaching such as bringing passion into teaching, ideas to interactively engage the students, and factors to judge the participation of students were also explored. Strategies to motivate the students, making

learning interesting and fun, definition of a good teacher or what constitutes a good teaching are also discussed and analyzed in this paper.

Our study is based on the assumption that designing new, effective, and engaging ways of instruction can help augment student learning. Incorporating contemporary principles of teaching, learning, and instruction can further improve the process of knowledge dissemination in the classrooms. It is important to include the conceptions of the teachers and their basic understanding. The current developments in the field of education should be embraced and applied to bridge the gap between knowledge delivery in class by teachers and the conceptual understanding of students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our study is based on the framework of Didaktik. As mentioned by Craig (2010), German Didaktik (meaning to teach, to be a teacher, to educate) is designed around the triangle of teacher, learner, and content. Craig, further cited Hopmann and Riquarts (2000) to stress that Didaktik concern itself with "reflective teaching, curriculum enactment, and teacher thinking." In the learning process, the Didaktik framework assigns an important role to a teacher. Because of the high value attributed to the role of a teacher in the process of knowledge dissemination, it is vital to explore teachers' views about the characteristics of the interactive and effective instruction.

Darling-Hammond (2000) and Trigwell (2001) as cited in Tigelaar, Dolmans, Wolfhagen, and Vleuten (2004) noted that "recent theories on teaching and assessment reveal that teaching is a complex activity that is shaped by the teaching context" (p. 253). Since the teaching context is important to learn about the process of teaching, it is crucial to consider the professors' views of teaching in studying higher education content. Tigelaar, Dolmans, Wolfhagen, and Vleuten (2004) further cited Putnam and Borko (1997) to highlight that with continuous changes in student learning and teacher role, professional development has become indispensable for the teachers. To successfully conduct professional development

workshops, it is imperative to involve teachers in understanding the learning process better.

Norton, Richardson, Hartley, Newstead, and Mayes (2005) cited Dunkin (1986) and Murray (1991) to mention that teachers vary in their teaching styles even if they teach the same subject. Different teaching styles can significantly impact learning and consequently affect student achievement scores. One of the ways to learn about different teaching styles is to understand teaching from the perspective of the teachers. Lecouteur & Delfabbro (2001) advocated the need to know more about the disparity in framing of knowledge by a teacher and by a student. However, this area of knowledge construction is not well explored. Our study strives to decipher the knowledge as generated and delivered in classrooms by teachers. By delving into the teachers' perceptions the study helps understand learning from a teacher's perspective.

Young (2008) writes,

conceptions of teaching and learning can be understood to be in ongoing states of development. Not surprisingly then, much time and effort in educational development is devoted to finding ways to help faculty members think about teaching in new ways—ways that will enable them to develop increasingly sophisticated conceptions of teaching consistent with current theories of teaching and learning (p.42).

Considering the importance of involving faculty members in advancing the field of teaching as described above. It is crucial to consider the conceptual, theoretical, and practical knowledge of the teachers. The knowledge gained from the interactions with the teachers is useful to design and formulate instructional strategies for effectively engaging students. The teaching methods and activities that promote learning serve as a means to improve instructional techniques.

STUDY PURPOSE

This study was a collective case design (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2005) with four faculty members chosen as cases. We report our observations of the faculty's classroom teaching and discuss their conceptions of interactive classroom engagement retrieved from the face to face interviews.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We posed two main research questions in this study.

What are the characteristics of an effective, interesting, and engaging teaching from the faculty's perspectives?

What are the faculty's understandings of their classroom interactivity while attempting to make the class instruction interesting, engaging, and effective?

To answer the main research questions, we designed a semi-structured interview protocol (Creswell, 2007). We used

the protocol for the conversations with the instructors. The protocol comprised ten questions and primarily searched for answers to the following questions:

- *How do you describe an interesting and engaging instruction?*
- *What do you do to make your teaching effective, interesting, and engaging?*
- *What contexts or situations have influenced your understandings of the best strategies to make your teaching effective?*

PARTICIPANTS

The study was conducted at a Southern Research One institute in the US. Three professors were from the College of Education and one professor was from the Business School. We used convenience sampling (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 1990) combined with criterion sampling (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 1990). The sampling criteria were being a faculty member in the college, willingness and availability to participate in the study, and convenience for the researchers. The four instructors; Dr. Stone (a pseudonym), Dr. Cook (a Pseudonym), Dr. Goss (a pseudonym), and Dr. Brown (a pseudonym) taught different subjects and varied in their teaching styles. Dr. Stone taught courses in the area of early childhood development and English as a second language, Dr. Cook taught management courses whereas both Dr. Goss's and Dr. Brown's teaching focused on culture, curriculum, and instruction.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

We interviewed each participant face to face. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes. Conversations were audio-taped using a recorder and transcribed within five to ten days of data collection. We analyzed the transcriptions using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1978), which guides identifying the common themes and help delimiting the theory. We read the transcribed verbatim (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005) a couple of times and simultaneously identified the common themes. Next, we grouped the themes and separated the categories associated with them.

FINDINGS

Effective, interesting, and engaging teaching

The participants in the study concurred that it is difficult to come up with one comprehensive definition for the characteristics of an effective teacher. They agreed that student learning should be the topmost priority for an effective teacher. A teacher should be interested and devoted to what she does, both culturally and cognitively. She should enjoy teaching and be empathetic to her students. If a teacher formulates her teaching around enhancing student learning, it can go a long way to help the teacher become successful in her field.

Dr. Goss stressed the importance of cultural competency; acknowledging the differences between the students' learning style; and attuning the teaching practices to the needs of diverse students. Dr. Goss said:

When we look for a good teacher we look for the teacher who has the knowledge, who has the skills but most importantly who also has the disposition to be in the classroom. Twenty First century educators need to have a social justice disposition meaning that they need to be empathetic to all types of learners. They need to have a kind of cultural competence when it comes to interacting."

According to Dr. Goss, it is also important to be flexible and ready to use a variety of strategies while teaching. As using only one strategy limits the number of students that can be engaged in a class. This idea is in consonance with the thoughts expressed by Ranson, Martin, Nixon, and McKeown (1996). The authors stressed the need to recognize different talents in individual students and the role of "agency in learning", which to a large extent is a teacher. Thus a teacher's role becomes critical to acknowledge the differences between the learning styles of different students and subsequently make suitable adjustments in their teaching.

Dr. Stone defined the characteristics of an effective teacher as multivariate. Dr. Stone said:

"There are multiple definitions. But good teaching is one that engages the students in some way or the other in learning. I want to refer to engaging the whole person [through] cognitive, social, emotional activities that engages them totally. Because we are all learning the ways and we have constraints. So teaching to the learning style of visual, auditory, kinesthetic learner is another aspect."

Dr. Stone mentioned that engaging the students completely in learning is crucial. Various activities that are designed to engage a student in different ways such as cognitive, social, and emotional help in augmenting learning. Different learning styles of the students should be considered to successfully involve them in the process of learning.

Dr. Cook highlighted the importance of being interested in the subject matter that you are teaching about. Dr. Cook said:

One component of a good teacher is to be interested in what you are teaching. It will be very difficult to be a good teacher without having interest in your own subject. It does not matter, what you are teaching because then it encourages you to go to web and look through articles and read books having knowledge about the subject matter. So that might be a small part of it and another part of it is to have knowledge of the subject matter. That is you have to know what you are talking about and obviously- experience."

Dr. Brown stressed the essence of empowering students to take responsibilities of their own learning rather than merely processing information for students.

Let me say there are many ways to define a good teacher, so if we have one definition we cannot fit all the good teachers under that definition. Perhaps a good teacher is someone who is concerned with the student learning than with the teaching. Let me explain what I mean by that. When you focus on learning, you seek different strategies to engage all of the learners knowing that any one strategy might not be as effective for all students as any other strategy. When the teachers are more interested in the teaching they think they have all the knowledge. And their approach is they are supposed to give information rather than the student having to work for it necessarily or the work that the students have to do is to process that information. So I think being a good teacher is a hard work."

Dr. Brown thought entertaining and interesting is not the same thing when it comes to teaching. Dr. Brown said:

I do not think that they [interesting and fun] are the same thing; I do not think that effective learning has to be fun but I do think it should be interesting. And does it have to be entertaining? No, I do not think entertaining and interesting is the same thing.

As summarized above, our participants had different opinions about interesting and effective teaching. They however shared common thoughts about enhancing student learning by applying different methods. They considered augmenting learning to be important than making learning a fun and enjoyable experience. Our interviewees agreed that making teaching process interesting is a challenging task.

According to Dr. Cook, It is important to strive for enhancing learning regardless of whether a student perceives the subject as dull or interesting. Only when the learning goal is accomplished a teacher can think of making the lecture interesting and enjoyable experience. Dr. Cook also mentioned that the perception of a subject to be interesting or boring is completely idiosyncratic. Every student is different and thus varies in learning styles and inclination for the subject. Consequently, Dr. Cook stressed that learning is the foremost goal of a teacher and it is not the responsibility of a teacher to make class instruction fun for students.

Dr. Brown brought forth a significant difference between interesting and fun. According to Dr. Brown interesting and fun are not same. It is important to make the lecture interesting; however, it is not a teacher's responsibility to make it fun.

Lecouteur & Delfabbro (2001) mentioned Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) and Thomas & Bain (1984) to stress that "certain kinds of teaching activities and methods of assessment encourage students to adopt particular approaches to

learning.” Additionally, the authors highlighted, “teachers’ conceptions affect the teaching strategies and activities adopted, their expectations and relationships with students, and their attitudes towards participation in teaching development programs” (p. 206). From the replies of the interviewees it is evident that they applied different teaching methods to attain a common goal of enhancing student learning.

Student motivation

Our participants agreed that it is possible to motivate students to learn; yet not all agreed that it is the teachers’ primary responsibility, nor that one approach is applicable to every student. The professors stressed that it is important for the students to have a basic level of inclination to study and learn the material. A teacher’s responsibility is more in nurturing and guiding the students than encouraging students to learn.

Dr. Stone stressed on taking a proactive role to motivate students. But the students should have an inclination to study and learn. Once the student is inclined to learn, a teacher can find ways to motivate students in an effective manner. Dr. Stone encourages students to learn by involving more students in different hands on activities. Dr. Stone said:

Again motivation it’s got to come from the students in the sense, trying to find out ways that it connects to experiences that they have had. Part of the motivation sometimes is in story-telling. My own personal experience is a way of motivating [students]. A way of putting it, making it relevant, making it something interesting. It is something that they can anticipate experiencing, that seems to help it make a little more interesting.”

Highlighting the basic premise in education that everyone wants to learn, Dr. Goss mentioned that educators face a daunting task of motivating students. Taking help from other fields such as Human resources may also be one of the options to find strategies to encourage students to learn. Once a teacher is able to find strategies that work with students, those techniques can be implemented to augment learning.

Dr. Cook opined that some of the class exercises are exciting and engage students. Sometimes the exercises are also motivating. However, not every single student can be motivated equally by using the same class activities or a single method of instruction. Dr. Cook noted: “...some stuff I do is not [going to] motivate every single student.”

Dr. Brown declined the statement that it is an instructor’s responsibility to motivate the students. According to Dr. Brown, students are self-motivated as they themselves selected a course of study and enrolled in the class to learn the subject. Students are motivated to learn the content, it is the teacher’s responsibility to find ways to sustain the motivation of the

students and extend their thinking to a level above the basic level. Dr. Brown said:

I do not think it is an instructor’s job to motivate students, I think it is as if I enter a room and this is how I plan my syllabi too when I am writing my syllabus it would something like- this would be great we can talk about this and this is wonderful so when I get to class I am already motivated I am waiting for 20, 18, 15 how many students are there. I think they are ready to talk non-stop and read the information critically and to engage, I kind of expect that they are going to be motivated so I do not think that it’s my job to motivate students. It is [a] professor’s job to somehow find a way to reach each student and find a way to motivate them to go beyond the basic understanding.”

Interactive engagement

The professors expressed differing views on interactively engaging students. It is important to involve and engage students to enhance participation. If the instructor makes extra efforts to reach out to the students and make them feel comfortable the students also respond accordingly. Dividing the class into small groups also enhance both intra-group and inter-group interactions. Creating a congenial and supportive environment also motivates students to take part in class interactions. If students trust the instructor and find the class environment helpful in learning, it promotes interaction and consequently student learning. Respecting the students’ values and creating an atmosphere in class that breeds trust, support, and healthy interaction is valuable to improve student learning. Sometimes it is important to change the physical setting of the class to promote interaction. Probing the students in an encouraging manner is also helpful in promoting student learning.

Dr. Stone places high importance on the enthusiasm of the instructor. According to Dr. Stone, it is in the best interest of the professors to constantly strive to excel in their field. Creating passion and energy in the classroom helps facilitate interactions. If the class atmosphere is supportive and safe, students are more willing to shed their inhibitions. This helps learn more about the students, not only the students’ strengths but also their weaknesses will become clear. Dr. Stone said:

One of them, I think is the enthusiasm of the instructor if the instructor likes what it is they are doing and find constant ways of learning, changing and challenging themselves and then conveying that to the students and helping them to feel comfortable in the environment and they too can offer their strengths or their weaknesses and get excited about whatever the topic is all about.”

Managing large classes is the key says Dr. Goss. To facilitate communication and improve interaction amongst students,

Dr. Goss divides the class into small groups, which are referred to as "learning communities." These small groups act as a catalyst to fuel discussions amongst the group members. Forming connection with the students through emails and personal contacts also helps in building a strong sense of belongingness, which further improves interactions. Dr. Goss said:

One of the things that I quickly had to learn was management of large classroom. As an example, I have had almost 200 or more undergraduate students per semester and I regret for not being personally there for each of the students. But what I have done is, I have broken each class into learning communities, students in groups of six to eight where they can support each other, communication is important. When students see that you are prepared and you are communicating and you are interacting and you are concerned about how they are doing they show up and they want to be involved. They not just physically show up but emotionally show up and they too become interested in the learning experience."

Dr. Cook stressed on interacting with the students by asking them questions. When students are graded for their responses, they are motivated to contribute. Enhanced familiarity with the subject facilitates good interactions. Valuing the content of the interaction is also important. Dr. Cook said:

One thing I do during my debriefing session is I pose the question and I wait until someone answers it and my students feel very uncomfortable with the silence in fact everyone feels uncomfortable with silence so someone's [going to] answer and may be two times in a class I may have sat down and asked like I wait until someone answers that question I think encouraging the students to answer those questions based on the personal experiences [and] having the respect for the student is important because students are not going to share the information about themselves if they perceive that the instructor does not respect them as a person."

Dr. Brown supported the Socratic approach. Without putting anyone on spot Dr. Brown asks questions to the students. The questions also serve as a road map for the class session. Changing the structural arrangements also helps to support the class discussions by making students comfortable. Once students come out of their comfort zone and realize that it is safe to participate, it sets the ball rolling for the class discussions. Sometimes dividing a large group into smaller parts also facilitates discussions. Dr. Brown said:

You know I like the Socratic approach, I like to ask questions, I like to prompt and probe and I know where I want the class to go. I have an agenda issues, I have content knowledge, I have the way to cover but it's not just that I like to ask questions that helps to lead it to another. To arrange the room sometimes in a way that allows for conversation so that people can see each other rather than just being hidden behind other people, some nights I just

let it go. Sometimes I just let the tables stay where they are, some nights I say that we need to sit and start figuring out the configuration, somehow that is about making that space feel comfortable for the people to share."

CONCLUSIONS

Our participants unanimously agreed that ensuring learning is the chief goal of a teacher. An effective teacher in the 21st century must have knowledge and skills along with the social disposition and empathy for the learners. It is also essential to be interested in one's own teaching and search relentlessly for knowledge to be a good teacher. The participants also stressed that interesting and entertaining are not the same. And there are ways through which the fun element can be injected in the learning process to make it more effective. By making connections to the experiences of the students the learning can be made more interesting as mentioned by one of the participants.

This study is useful to gain insight about the teaching field. Age old question of engaging students effectively can be addressed to an extent by findings from this study. The study provided more information about student motivation, bringing passion into teaching and handling large classes. More studies can be done to explore the impact of discipline and sex of the teacher. An extended study can help create a more holistic picture about that fascinating and challenging aspect of teaching and role of interactivity in class.

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