

LEARNING TEACHING: A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

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Abstract: *The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes ~ Marcel Proust.* This paper is a reflection of a teacher's experience of becoming critically reflective of his/her teaching practices. The teaching practices were triangulated through four lenses as proposed by Brookfield (1995): 1) autobiography as a learner and teacher, 2) colleagues' experiences, 3) students' eye and 4) theoretical literature. The first lens is a written reflective task on the journey of being a learner and now a teacher. This lens proves that one's teaching practices are linked to how one was taught as a student. The second lens is the non-evaluative feedback provided by peers about the teacher's teaching practices. The third lens is the feedback provided by students on certain specific concern that the teacher had highlighted. The final lens is the process of linking the practical aspects with theoretical aspects. Each lens reinforces one another. Consequently, this process helps one not only to become critical but also reflective of the teaching practices. Through this process a clear link was identified amongst the four lenses. The new perspective gained from this experience is indeed very crucial for all the academicians as it is a process of renewal of teaching practices by identifying discrepancies or conformities amongst the four lenses.

Keywords: Critically Reflective, Teaching Practices, Feedback

INTRODUCTION

The researcher/teacher examined her teaching practices in her Communication Skills class which consist of 70 students from the school of business. This subject is catered for second year students from the undergraduate program. The learning abilities of the students usually range from proficient learners to less proficient learners although they are all placed in one class. At times, the teacher finds it is difficult to control the pace of learning because the less proficient learners may be slower in understanding some concepts compared to the proficient learners. Although the teacher has been teaching for the past 8 years in a higher education setting, she always feel that teaching mixed ability students in one class is challenging especially, to keep everyone in the class engaged. The teacher understands that she has to guide and give the students the best learning curve so that the teaching is challenging and at the same time attainable. In order to provide the best learning point for every lecture and tutorial, the teacher needs to work with the students very closely by analysing their needs, weaknesses and strengths. Triangulation of the teaching practices using Brookfield's Four Lenses was a good opportunity for the teacher to review the teaching practices and at the same time address her concern about student engagement in classes.

The Four Lenses

The teaching practices were triangulated through four lenses as proposed by Brookfield (1995): 1) autobiography as a learner and teacher, 2) students' eye, 3) colleagues' experiences and 4) theoretical literature. This process helps the teacher not only to become critical but also reflective of her own teaching practices continuously. As a clear link is identified amongst the four lenses, a new perspective of teaching practice is gained. This experience is indeed very valuable for the teacher as it is a process of renewal of teaching practices by identifying discrepancies or conformities amongst the four lenses. Next sub-sections explain in detail each lens.

1. Learning Autobiography

Writing the learning autobiography was the most emotional lens among the four lenses. This is because the teacher had to recall her past experience and reflect about herself as a learner and now a teacher. She realised that the expectation she has on the students, the principles that she believes in as an educator, and the research area that she is interested in are all based on her past experience as a learner.

The *research area* that she has been focusing for the past 8 years is on less proficient language learners. As a language teacher, she believes, this is the group of learners that should be given more attention in order to make them aware of the various ways of learning languages effectively. In comparison, proficient language learners generally use strategies that are appropriate to their own stage of learning, personality and age (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989). Therefore, it can be concluded that proficient language learners seldom face difficulty in language acquisition because they can conjure a set of pattern or strategy appropriate to their needs.

After the process of writing the learning autobiography, the teacher found the reason why she has been trying to find solutions for less proficient learners. In fact, it is because the teacher was an unsuccessful learner previously until she became conscious of her own learning. In view of this, Schmidt (1990) claims that conscious learning is a necessary condition for every aspect of learning. Therefore, when learners become aware or conscious of their level, they will take more responsibility in learning – this was evident in the teacher’s life.

Consequently, because of her learning experience, the *principles* she believes in as an educator is a learner has to be aware, conscious and responsible of his or her own learning in order to be a successful learner. Therefore, the teacher constantly try to imply these principles to the students in order for them to become successful learners as well.

2. Colleagues’ Experiences

This lens gave the teacher the experience of being observed without being evaluated. In the past, every time the teacher was observed, it was for department appraisal purposes. The real benefit of peer observation could not be realised as there were issues of inequality, judgmental and performance. However, through Brookfield’s Four Lenses, peer observation was effective as emphasised by Gosling (2000), ‘it can be a powerful learning experience’. Evidently, even more effective because of the teacher’s supportive and helpful colleagues.

It has always been the teacher’s belief that if the students want to be more aware, conscious and responsible of their learning, then they should be more engaged during the class. This is not easy to achieve especially when large number of students are placed in one class. Therefore, student engagement was the aspect the was highlighted to the teacher’s colleagues when they observed her.

Although, student engagement was the concern, the teacher realised that two of her colleagues who observed her said that the student engagement increases as time passes by. However, there was new information that emerged from the peer observation. One of the colleagues shared with the teacher something she never knew she had problem with during her 8 years of teaching. The colleague mentioned that the teacher becomes very tentative when giving feedback to the students during lecture. The following is an extract of the colleague’s point of view:

“It was a good effort made by the teacher to use various questions to increase students’ engagement. However, it is noticed that the teacher’s responses to her students answer were at times not clear. When students gave the wrong answer, instead of saying the student’s answer was wrong, the teacher would continue probing. When students gave the right answer, the teacher would acknowledge it by using the answer to relate to the given concepts. It would also be acceptable if the teacher acknowledges students’ correct answer by praising them or telling them that their answers were correct.”

After a discussion with the colleague, the teacher realised that she provides feedback tentatively all the time especially when having open discussions with students in the class. After some reflection it was understood that it is also related to the teacher’s past experience as a learner. When the teacher started her tertiary education, she became more confident which led her to become more aware and conscious of her learning and eventually she became a successful learner. Therefore, the teacher believes that when a person is confident, he or she will learn better and this is what the teacher wants the students to achieve. The teacher did not want them to feel embarrassed or demotivated in the class. Perhaps, this could also be the reason why the teacher recently embarked on her journey to find ways to motivate unsuccessful learners through Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). According to Love (2001), learners who do not perform well often carry feelings of inadequacy into subsequent testing experience or other aspects of their academic performance. Eventually, this feeling will perpetuate and persist in every phase of their lives. The teacher did not like her students to be feel less confident in the class, and therefore it resulted in her becoming very tentative in providing feedback. Consequently, the tentative answers and feedback have been a hindrance for students’ learning because they have to guess the teacher’s feedback all the time. As highlighted by Eraut (2006), feedback is important especially in higher education context:

“When students enter higher education . . . the type of feedback they then receive, intentionally or unintentionally, will play an important part in shaping their learning futures. Hence we need to know much more about how their learning, indeed their very sense of professional identity, is shaped by the nature of the feedback they receive. We need more feedback on feedback.”

After the colleague’s feedback on the way the teacher provides feedback to her students, the teacher was having a difficult time to change the fossilised habit. She would recall what her colleague had mentioned but she would go back to the same habit of being tentative because she felt comfortable doing that.

3. Students’s Eye

Then another lens proposed by Brookfield was experimented. This helped the teacher to understand students’ perspective of her teaching. There were three surveys that were carried out based on the teacher’s teaching. The first one was a general one which asked students to write one aspect of teaching that the teacher should stop, start and continue. The results revealed that many students liked the way the teacher taught them and requested her to continue the teaching approaches. This actually reconfirmed the teacher’s colleagues’ point of view on the students’ engagement which was initially the concern of the teacher.

However, the teacher had some students who highlighted about the way she provide comments. The students wanted more comments and more instantaneous feedbacks. It dawned on the teacher then that she has to consciously do something about the feedback process. The students’ feedback on the teacher’s teaching practice has now helped her to realise that there is a new area of concern which was also highlighted by the colleagues – providing appropriate feedback.

The teacher then started to consciously comment on the students’ answers during lectures. She used phrases like ‘good’, ‘that’s correct’, ‘that is not right’, and ‘this is the correct answer’. She had to think about words and phrases to use before going for classes which was not easy. However, with conscious reminder the teacher managed to change some of the feedbacks. She also provided immediate feedback after speech presentations and provided consultation after the second test for that particular semester.

The second survey was conducted three weeks later by the department and she could see an improvement. 80% of the students agreed that they received helpful feedback from the teacher, 15% were neutral while the remaining 5% did not agree. Within a week later, on the last day of the class for the semester, the teacher conducted another survey. The result was almost the same although there was an interesting development to it. 80% of the students liked the feedback session provided by the teacher but this time 20% were neutral – no one disagreed.

From this lens, it is concluded that now the teacher has to start reviewing and researching on the aspect of providing appropriate feedback to students.

4. Theoretical Literature

The initial concern the teacher had of her teaching practice was ‘student engagement’. However, the emerged concern after the peer observation and student evaluation is ‘providing appropriate feedback’. For that reason, this lens (theoretical literature) would be the footing to assist the teacher in providing appropriate feedback to students in higher education.

Through this lens, it is discovered that student engagement and providing appropriate feedback are inter-related. One of the techniques to maintain student engagement is through providing appropriate feedback. In view of this, Black & William (1998) mentioned that the provision of challenging assignments and **extensive feedback** lead to **greater student engagement** and higher achievement.

Now, everything can be linked together, and there is a reason why the new concern emerged. It is actually not new but part of teacher’s concern which is student engagement. All the lenses proposed by Brookfield (1995) are now linked to each other.

Hattie & Timperley (2007) suggested an approach of providing feedback by identifying three questions – 1) Where am I going (goals), 2) How am I going? And 3) Where to next? In the first question, students have to know their goal and convey it clearly to their teachers. This will assist the teachers to provide feedback based on the students’ goal. The next questions is based on how well the students are progressing towards the goal. Tests do not have to be the only feedback the students should receive. The last question leads to greater possibilities of

learning. This could be beyond achieving the goal that was set. This approach helps the students to become self-regulated learners which refers to self-generated thoughts and behaviours that are oriented towards the achievement of their goals, with the interaction of environmental conditions (Zimmerman, 2002). By analysing and setting students' own desired outcome (goal), it would be easier for the teachers and students to be in tune with academic progression. This is supported by Biggs (2003) in which he suggested constructive alignment. He said that the teaching system, teaching methods and assessment should be aligned with intended learning outcome so that students have no other choice but to learn what they intend to learn. Therefore, by setting students' own goals and conveying it clearly to the teachers, both parties could work towards providing appropriate feedback. This eventually leads to greater student engagement because the choice of the goal/desired outcome/ intended learning outcome is theirs.

In fact, suprisingly, this approach also leads to the principle that the teacher believes in teaching that students should become more aware, conscious and responsible of their learning in order to be successful learners.

It is believed that with appropriate feedback by teachers, students will understand what they are lacking in achieving the goal and progressively work towards achieving it. Sadler (1989) reinforced that it is closing the gap between where the students are and where they are aiming to be that leads to power of feedback. The review of the teaching practices through this lens has indeed given a new research gap to fill in – providing appropriate feedback.

CONCLUSION

Brookfield's Four Lenses, indeed, has given the teacher a truly fresh perspective and she is amazed how much everything links to each other: from the learning experience, the teaching principles that she believes in, the research needs to the current teaching practices from the view of colleagues, students and literature. This exciting and revealing experience has given the teacher an opportunity to fill in a new research gap. The future research plan is to continue finding ways to improve the way to provide feedback to the students especially in higher education setting. Every academician is encouraged to triangulate his/her teaching practices because the lenses proposed by Brookfield assist in understanding the teaching practices from different perspectives.

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