Discovering the Teacher Within

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Abstract:

In this reflective piece, as an instructor in a teacher education program, I embark on a path to hone my method of instruction in a classroom of fourth grade students. As I reflect on my instructional practices, I ultimately discover ways to improve student learning by leveraging both my strengths as an instructor and the skills my students bring to the classroom. This written work is my reflection as an instructor on how I engaged my students in learning new science concepts.

Key Words:

teaching, active learning, reciprocal teaching, motivation, reflection.

Introduction

I recall my recent experiences teaching at my placement during my teacher education program. I was a bit nervous during my first few weeks because I was teaching at a school that I did not know very much about. To alleviate my anxiety, I kept telling myself to practice what I had just learned in my credential program.

As I started teaching my lesson, the students first looked at me with eyes full of wonder and excitement since I was a stranger entering their classroom. Fortunately, I was able to connect with the students easily with my jokes and knowledge about Spiderman and Star Wars. Jack liked my rendition of the Green Goblin. Susan, like me, enjoyed Joe's Kids jokes from the juice boxes at Trader Joe's: "What's the difference between a fish and a piano?" Susan asked me.

I shook my head.

"You can't TUNA fish!" Susan squealed and the rest of the students burst into laughter. I laughed too, although I already heard that joke many times before. I was happy that they accepted me. In this environment, I was ready to help them learn.

Although I was able to connect with the students, I still found the first week to be challenging. I flipped through the lessons in the teaching guides and realized they did not accommodate a large array of learners. I taught the lessons from a textbook as students followed along. As I lectured about the different parts of a human body, I observed how students were fidgeting their bodies in their seats. Many students seemed unengaged with the 2D visualizations in the text. In the back of the room, some students started chatting about how they would each position themselves as X-wing pilots to take down the Death Star. Looking at my classroom, I felt frustrated.

"Okay, here is a quiz to test what you have learned for the week. Remember, you may look up for inspiration, down in desperation, but not side to side for information!" I remarked.

The class started working on the quiz, but by the look on their faces, I could see some of them were struggling. Susan was biting on the straw of her juice box and frowning in frustration. Jack was looking down in desperation. John exclaimed, "The cell of an animal reminds me of a potato!"

The quiz scores did not come out with the high scores that I hoped for. This further concerned me: What did I do wrong? Over the weekend, I pondered over a phrase that a veteran teacher once told me: "Teaching is an art and a craft." I admit that I felt a bit discouraged, but hope was not lost. I was determined to aid the students in processing the information in class better. I was determined to change the way we went about the curriculum. I was determined to not let Susan ever bite her straw with that kind of frustration again.

After this experience, I asked myself, "Why was there so much student engagement about Star Wars, Spider Man, and the Green Goblin? And why was there less engagement for biology?" I thought about this for a few hours, and I realized it maybe wasn't so much the content, but perhaps the way the content was presented and experienced.

Recognizing this need for more engaging and interactive learning, I transformed the game plan for teaching them biology. The focus of the next lesson was cells – the smallest unit of an organism. And my goal was to harness their physical energy that I saw in their fidgeting by getting their blood flowing and cells moving through an activity.

"Okay everyone, today we are going to learn about cells. Does anyone know what a cell is?" I asked.

"My mommy said it's where I go if I am a bad boy," Jack answered.

"Ah, no. Jack. That is one type of cell, a prison cell. However, the cell we are going to talk about today is a tiny unit that makes up our entire body!" I responded.

The class interest was piqued. Good, I thought. "Although the cell is the tiniest part that makes up our body, there are different parts even within that tiny cell. Okay, everybody, we're going to divide into groups," I continued.

After they divided into groups, I had them discuss with each other for half an hour about the different parts of the cell – the mitochondria, the nucleus, the cytoplasm, etc. Then, I said, “Now that you all have an idea of what the different parts of the cell are, each of you will become part of a cell. Each group is a cell and everyone in the group is responsible for one part of the cell. Please act it out and describe it to the rest of the class.”

This made them really excited. I watched them brainstorm, review the roles of each part, and work together to craft a performance. I could gauge what they knew or did not know in the context of a fun environment. I helped out by going around to each of the groups, engaging in conversations with the students, and asking students questions with the goal of clarifying concepts and building background knowledge.

One group had a boy do the worm on the ground. “I’m the cytoplasm, a jiggly substance that all the other parts are in!”

Another girl sat on a chair with her arms folded and face confident. “I am the nucleus! I am the boss here!” she claimed.

One boy rolled up into a ball and said, “I am the ribosome. I’m really small, but I help make proteins.”

I smiled and laughed at all their fantastic performances. I was pleased with the amount of creativity and fun resulting from the activity, in addition to the learning. The students were able to teach each other about the different parts of the cell as well. Instead of chatting about X-wing pilot formations, they chatted about different anatomical cell formations.

At the end of that week, I gave out another quiz to see if students remembered the concepts and could demonstrate their knowledge in writing. “Today we are taking another quiz to see how much you know about the different parts of the cell. Remember, you may look up for inspiration, down in desperation, but not side to side for information!”

I looked around the class and the students breezed through the quiz much quicker than the previous week’s. There were no signs of looking down in desperation and Susan’s juice box straw was free of bite marks. The results of the quiz showed that every student scored above a 93% – a phenomenal result! Nevertheless, the genuine joy that both the students and I felt was the best result.

I look back at my first teaching experience with a sense of accomplishment. As an academic in higher education, these valuable teaching experiences formed the foundation for my practical theory of learning: Learning is built on personal relevance, multiple means of engagement, and social interaction. My interactions with this fourth grade classroom helped me better understand the works of Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and John Dewey from my teacher education program, since I had opportunities to apply their theories to enhance student learning in the actual classroom. Sometimes, the concepts we learn in teacher education make more sense through the lessons of practice.

Initially, I was frustrated because the students seemed more interested in forming Star Wars X-wing teams than learning about biology. Looking back now, the X-wing

pilots were more personally relevant and intrinsically motivating for the students. Drawing upon theories of learning that encourage peer interaction, I decided to ask students to become various parts of a cell and to work together to make sense of a cell's functions. So instead of trying to take down the death star as a team of X-wing pilots during class, the students have now become parts of a cell that work together as a team to tackle the challenge of learning new biological concepts.

Through these experiences, the lesson I learned is not to look at someone else's lesson plan, but to look at my students and how they can enjoy learning new concepts. As I discover the teacher within, I seek to continuously innovate strategies to engage the joy, strengths, and energy of my students.

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