

RICARDO LOZANO**REFLECTIONS FOLLOWING THREE YEARS OF TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION OF EDUCATORS IN TURKEY: CONSTRUCTING AN OPTIMISTIC, YET REALISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION**

Today I understood that having a good time in class is not a very difficult thing to do.

The previous line was written by Fatih, a male, classroom management student in a teacher-training program in Turkey, as part of his daily class reflection.

Three years ago, I embarked in the most exciting adventure of my life. I packed my bags, left everything behind, moved to a foreign land, and became a professor at a teacher-training program in Turkey. As this was my first appointment as a professor and, as a way to get immediate feedback from students with regards to my teaching, I decided to ask my students to write daily reflections at the end of every class (and semester reflections at the end of every term). Students were asked to reflect upon what had happened in class, and to think about how they had grown or changed based on class topics, examples, and discussions. What follows are four lessons learned over the last three years by my students and, most importantly, by me.

In Turkey, as in many other parts of the world, the teaching profession has been associated with an idealistic sense of virtuousness inspired by a naïve enthusiasm to contribute to the betterment of the world (Lozano & Kizilaslan, 2012). However, when faced with the challenges inherent to the profession, many young teachers are confronted with the realities of low salaries, inadequate teaching facilities, heavy workloads, and crowded classes (Cakiroglu & Cakiroglu, 2003; Sabanci, 2009). These challenges “have the potential of plummeting the romantic, ideal perceptions of the profession” (Lozano & Kizilaslan, 2012, p. 139). Consequently, the main question hovering over my mind was how to provide my students with a realistic, yet optimistic understanding of the teaching profession.

Looking back at my students’ (and my own) reflections of the last three years, these are the main lessons learned regarding my question of how to provide my future teachers with a realistic understanding of education, without destroying their dream for a bright future in the profession.

First Lesson Learned: Provide Avenues for the Increasing of Students’ Sense of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a person’s belief about his or her chances of successfully accomplishing a specific task (Bandura, 1982), and it is developed through the “*gradual acquisition of ... skills through experience*” (Gist, 1987, p. 472) [emphasis mine]. When my students in Turkey were challenged by assignments somewhat foreign to the educational system to which they were accustomed (i.e. oral participation, particularly in English, their second language), initially, they were lacking the self-confidence required to complete these assignments successfully.

As an individual new and foreign to my students' culture and education system, I was in great need to adjust my teaching methods and style to one which would provide them with the self-efficacy required for the successful completion of the required assignments. The key, in my case, was the *gradual* introduction of this new set of assignments, along with the provision of the needed encouragement to actually step-up and *experience* the process of completing them (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003).

The challenge was not an easy one, especially since students would come to my class already afraid of this *yabancı* (foreign) professor whose ideas were quite different from those to which they were accustomed. Sultan, one of my female, educational administration students, when referring to me in her reflection would comment that:

My friends... mentioned that Ricardo Lozano was very strict... he does not like our presentations and asks us a lot of questions. He is a very difficult person. So, at the beginning of the semester I was afraid of you.

This was, indeed, a difficult transition for me. How could I help my students understand the benefits my unorthodox teaching style? I began with the idea of "step-up and kill the monster!". Through this simple illustration, I would encourage my students to take small steps towards something somehow new to them. I would also tell my students how, once they had taken a step towards killing the monster, they would realize that the monster does not exist; it is nothing but a fog which can be easily walked through. After a few weeks of gently persuading my students to step-up and kill the monster by working in small groups and increase their oral participation, their reflections began to change. For instance, Hande, a female student in my classroom management course commented:

I don't want to forget this: This class is not a monster. Kill the monster.

Once the idea of killing the monster was clear in my student's minds, I began to introduce more complex assignments, such as individual oral presentations. Students were aware of the fact that this new assignment would not be easy; however, with a little encouragement, they were able to understand the value of trying new things and to enjoy the benefits of an increased sense of self-efficacy. In the words of Mesut, a male educational administration student:

This semester was really stressful and tiring, but beneficial. The presentation was really hard and a little bit different... I am happy for this course because I don't believe it was a waste of time, I would be happier if it was easier, but I cannot complain about the results.

Second Lesson Learned: Helping Students Overcome their Fear of Expressing their Thoughts and Opinions

Education in Turkey is predominantly teacher-centered. Teachers are frequently observed to be sensitive to talking, and even whispering, among students. Classroom noise, regardless of its source is, generally speaking, not tolerated by teachers in Turkey (Akkok, Askar & Sucuoglu, 1995; Atici & Merry, 2001), where "the role of the teacher is to dispense facts and the role of the student is to listen and memorize

them” (Lozano & Kizilaslan, 2013, p. 184). It is clear that in Turkey, there are numerous excellent teachers. However, the long-established idea of respect is often expected to be expressed through submission and reservedness.

With this understanding of the Turkish education system and culture, and after a certain level of individual self-efficacy had been instilled in my students, the following challenge to my teaching was to provide students with an opportunity to express their own ideas and opinions freely in class. I began by asking simple questions, like: “Is education important?” and, once my students were comfortable enough to say “yes”, I would ask the follow-up question “why?”.

Through my teaching in Turkey, I have learned that, when students are given the opportunity and the time to think through a particular matter, they will produce the most creative answers. However; transitioning into a system of asking questions and promoting discussions was not easy. My students were literally shocked when confronted with a system in which they were encouraged to express their ideas and opinions freely. Cem, a male student in my educational administration course expressed:

At the beginning of the semester... I was shocked because of your difficult questions about education.

Initially I had to persist at communicating my genuine interest on my students’ thoughts and ideas. Betül, a female student in my introduction to education course, after understanding and believing in my honest interest not only in teaching, but also in learning, commented:

You care about our ideas and encourage us to talk in class. I mean, you and we teach the lessons together.

Once this level of understanding and trust was built, my students were more comfortable analyzing different ideas, and developing a personal opinion in relation to the different topics addressed in class. Gülçin, a student in my introduction to education course, expressed:

I learned to think on a question by asking various questions... Actually, I learned to be like a philosopher. Thus, I can overcome hard questions and interpret different things.

By the end of the semester, Irem, also a student in my introduction to education course, expressed her ideas concerning my course, and said:

From the beginning of this semester, I faced many difficulties when you asked a question, also I couldn’t express my ideas easily. This lesson taught me to look at different topics in different ways. I learned many useful things about explaining the ideas in logical order and how to think about something in a logical way. Now, I can explain my ideas easily.

Third Lesson Learned: The Importance of Cooperative Learning

Another lesson learned by both, my students and I, has been the importance of the regular integration of cooperative learning into the classroom. Cooperative learning engages students in the learning process by promoting critical thinking,

reasoning, and problem-solving skills, resulting in better self-esteem, improved collaborative skills, and increased achievement (Ahmad & Mahmood, 2010; Borich, 1996; Bramlett, 1994; Mengnin, 1995; Stevens & Slavin, 1995; Webb, Trooper & Fall, 1995).

Through my teaching, I have learned to organize my students in groups of three. Each student is then given a specific responsibility such as time-keeper, note-taker, and speaker. At the end of a short period of time, usually 20-30 minutes, students are expected to write a short essay and deliver a brief, 5-7 minute presentation, which should answer the questions of what (a definition of the object or idea addressed in that particular class), why (what is the purpose of this object or idea; why does it exist), how does it work (or what does it look like) in real life, and finally, students are expected to provide an example. By answering what, why, how, and example questions, students are required to organize their ideas in a coherent manner, and by delivering a short essay and oral presentation, their understanding of the concepts, theories or ideas addressed at the moment is easily assessed, at the same time that students are given an opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned.

One of the greatest benefits of cooperative learning is that it provides students with an opportunity to analyze, and make sense out of information, as opposed to having to deal with isolated, seemingly irrelevant facts thrown at them (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Tomlinson, 1999). Additionally, research suggests that talking and moving are valid strategies to strengthen learning, improve memory and retrieval, and enhance learner motivation and morale (Courchesne & Allen, 1997; Jensen, 2005; Kim, Ugirbil & Strick, 1994). Based on my personal observations and experiences, cooperative learning is also an excellent support-technique to be integrated with the additional purposes of increasing students' sense of self-efficacy, and their ability to express ideas freely in small, safe environments.

In addition to the well documented and experiential benefits of cooperative learning, my students have also observed it to be an effective practicing tool to be used in preparing for major assignments given later in the semester. Akgül, a student in my educational administration class, when referring to the benefits of cooperative learning, stated that:

The whole semester consists of kind of group working. Random groups help to manage group working in a small group. I think it helps for our midterm and final presentations. It gives us an idea of how we're going to make group work, even in 5 minutes.

Fourth Lesson Learned: The Positive Effects of Making Teaching Fun

As I reflect upon my teaching and upon my students' reflections on my teaching, it is interesting to see the things they remember about me. Cem, a male student in my classroom management course, commented:

When I came to class... everybody, including me was surprised... when you came and looked at the whole class with a smile and said: Hi guys!

Cem's reflection reminds me of the importance of making teaching fun, and creating a learning environment which celebrates the joys of both teaching and

learning. “What is education?” I ask my students on the first day of school. Then I say: “Teacher speaks, speaks, speaks. Student sleeps, sleeps, sleeps. The night before the exam, student stays up memorizing the book. Then, right after the exam, all of the information slips off his brain.”. Students laugh at my definition of education, and nod their heads in agreement.

Teachers often overrate the importance of content, and underrate the part they play in stimulating students to actually desire to know and become life-long learners. How we teach is more important than what we teach. However; educators often worry about wasting precious lecture time to class discussions and collaborative learning that takes time away from covering the required material. This is interesting, especially since we are fully aware of the fact that most invariably, and within a very short period of time, students forget much of the information learned through lecturing and memorization (DiCarlo, 2009). Creating a space for fun, interaction, and trust in the classroom has been reported to promote engagement, hypothesis testing, problem solving, deep learning, and meaning (Hromek & Roffey, 2009; Robinson & Kakela, 2006).

As educators, we often focus on engagement and achievement levels. Based upon my own experiences in the classroom, I can conclude that, when teaching and learning are made fun – through walking around the room, through the use of distinctive gestures, facial expressions, body motions, voice inflections, and through maintaining eye-contact with students – engagement, and consequently, achievement levels, increase. Büşra, a future math teacher in my classroom management course, seems to have understood the concept.

When teachers are guides, and students are active participants, instruction will be more fun. Students can learn in schools very well. I understand that mathematics can be fun too. I am so happy to take this course.

When Ayten, a female student also in my classroom management course, was provided the opportunity to experience fun in the classroom, she was able to adjust her perspective on teaching and learning, and concluded that teaching can actually be enjoyable:

We learned lots of things about classroom management, students, teachers and teaching techniques. Before I took this lesson, I thought being a teacher in high school is boring but after the lesson I think it’s too enjoyable.

Conclusion

Through my reflections after three years as a professor in a teacher-training program in Turkey, I have learned 1) to provide avenues for the increasing of students’ sense of self-efficacy, 2) to help students overcome their fear of expressing their thoughts and opinions, 3) the importance of cooperative learning, and 4) the positive effects of making teaching fun.

Most of my students were interested in, and pleased by my seemingly unorthodox teaching style. These students provided me with positive feedback encouraging me to continue providing them with the gift of choice, and with avenues to express their thoughts and opinions. Also, as it is to be expected, some of my students have expressed the thought that my teaching style does not precisely

concur with their learning style and personal philosophy of education. Aylin, a female student in my classroom management class, expressed:

I have ideas about education methods and how people should be educated. I will decide my education method. I think I will be teacher centered. Because until high school I was educated with this way and, according to my education philosophy, it is more effective for children.

Regardless of my students' personal choices, I am grateful for the opportunity to challenge them to explore and experiment with different learning and teaching styles, from which to develop their own philosophy of education. Whatever decision my students make for their future careers, I can only agree with Salih, student in my classroom management course, and say that:

I hope to be a real teacher one day, and that my students will remember me with smiling faces.

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