

Dialogue Education in a Tertiary Institution¹

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In most cases, lecturers are hired into a university based on their academic laurels and work experience with little or no reference to his ability to teach. I am no exception to this situation. We get into the lecture hall to experiment with what we know best and hope that we are doing the right thing. Often time our guide is the way our own lecturers handled us when we were back in school.

So it was a matter of great joy to me when two Global Learning Partners facilitators were asked to take us through a 5-day workshop aimed at helping us teach our adult learners better. For me, it was an opportunity to evaluate all I had done in the past one year and find ways on improving my teaching and planning skills.

The workshop was very revealing. I came to know and understand the principles behind some of the things I was doing and that reinforced me to go ahead and do them better. On the other hand I learned new practices and tools that I could start using in my class.

After the session, one great wish of the facilitators was that we should try/put to test/use all that we have learned. So during the semester that followed, I set out with my new experiment; a blend of personal experiences and lessons from Learning to Listen Learning to Teach.

The first step was to review my course outline. For the first time, I included the objective of the course to create relevance about the course. In addition, I included a basic understandings and expectations about how the course period would operate.

My second step was a change in the sitting arrangement. This time round, the class of 23 students sat in a semi circle. It allowed for my easy movement in the classroom and for better eye contact among the students themselves.

The lecture period was now broken into sections. The first one was always a presentation and question time from a group based on the previous week's take home (assignment). This allowed for a lot more discussion on difficult areas of the previous week's topic. The students appreciated being able to critique, question and argue with their own colleagues.

Then comes my turn to lead the discussion for the day. This time round, my approach is different. My main points for discussion are well prepared and on flip charts. As we go through the topic, I always seek the views and insights of the students before presenting mine. On a good day, my views become redundant because the students do say it all. To create fun and good interaction, students are invited to the centre while making their views known.

¹ This reflection was first shared in the Global Learning Partners e-newsletter, winter 2008.

We always take a break between the 3-hour periods. The students take turns to provide refreshments for the class during the break. The first bill at the beginning of each semester is mine with no standards set. You provide what you can afford. However, we were impressed about the different kinds of stuff we had in the course of the semester. They enjoyed it!

I also introduced term papers in all my courses. The student formed their own groups and worked on their term papers. The group work brought in some team spirit and bonding among the students in the class. Before the final work is turned in, I had the occasion to read through the work on at least three different occasions to make the necessary corrections and give them guidance. This encouraged them a lot and gave them a sense of assurance they were on the right track.

At the end of the semester, the students acknowledge the fact that they have a good understood the course. They ended up with good grades and I enjoyed the time with them. Lecturer/student barriers were broken and this encouraged some of the students to discuss personal matters with me. For them, I am the one they can trust.

But I must confess, this calls for hard, hard, hard work. You can't afford to be lazy to achieve this. To be in the position to dialogue on a subject means that you are well vest in it. This calls for a lot of reading and preparation. I learned from the workshop that every one hour of contact with the students will require at least three hours of preparation. Can you imagine what I have to put in for a three hour contact?

This approach to learning also calls for creativity. One needs to be creative in asking open leading question, creative in stimulating discussions, creative with the homework, creative with flip chart presentations The list is endless.

However, it is rewarding. Rewarding to you as a teacher and rewarding to the students as learners. I always look back with joy and pride. I always feel embedded in what I am doing as a lecturer. Now I feel I am making an impact on my students.

Some of the students are currently Teaching Assistants in the University. They walk up to me to talk about my lecture periods. Although they complained that it was hectic, required lots of work and preparation, they also attest to the fact that they liked the approach, learned a lot and still have vivid memories of some of the class time. They can never forget the course. In short, they have been truly educated.

Now I teach larger classes and things are different. From a class of 23 now I need to handle 60 and 93. Some of the practices and tools I used in the past will not work here. However, the principles are the same. This calls for more creativity and imagination. *What are you doing to keep the dialogue going?*



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