

Didaktisches Konzept

Students As Teachers



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Swap Roles: Students as Teachers – A Practical Example of Student Participation in classrooms

1. Abstract

The objective of the project described in the following was to foster students' motivation, enhance their autonomous learning skills and ability to self-assess their performance with a content-based, cross-curricular approach in language learning. In order to achieve this aim the roles of students and teacher were swapped. Students had to confront themselves with questions such as: Which topics make learning interesting and are relevant for my future profession? Which teaching style is effective? How can my own performance as a teacher be evaluated? Students were provided with the possibility of working on a complex and challenging problem, namely that of acting as teachers conveying new content, and thus performing in a role yet unknown to them while at the same time language skills were fostered and practised. Further, students were offered opportunities for interaction, communication and cooperation as well as given the freedom to set their own goals. The evaluations have shown that students achieved the set goal of increased learner independence, enjoyed the freedom they were given and unanimously agreed to have greatly benefited from the task.

2. General remarks

It is safe to say that over the past decades both learning and teaching have changed tremendously with the arrival of new technologies, social networks, smart phones, “instant messaging, instant credit, instant gratification”. (Schweizer, 2008:2) Long gone are the days of conventional teaching in which students were expected to sit in silence, recite lessons, memorize assignments, or talk only when called upon. Progressive educational practices focus more on the individual student's needs rather than assuming all students are at the same level of understanding. The modern way of teaching is more activity based, using questioning, explaining, demonstration and collaboration techniques. However, not only teaching methods have changed rather the learners themselves have also changed. Students will not accept everything that is served to them anymore. They have – in a sense – grown up to be their own masters and, if offered, willingly make use of their right to co-determine what and how they would like to learn. Many concepts and expressions such as collaborative learning, independent learning, self-directed learning, autonomous learning, humanistic education, powerful learning environments (PLE) and many more have emerged over the past decades, which all have a common denominator: to treat the learner as an individual who is the expert in his/her own learning process. (comp. vanMerriënboer, 2003) Thus, the role of the teacher has changed, too. I see a teacher as a facilitator, as someone who provides the space for students to gain a deeper understanding of how their mind works in the learning process, who offers the

opportunity for students to express themselves, someone who has the courage to give up control and hand it over to the learner. Keeping what has been said so far in mind, I came up with the idea of “ student team teaching – students as teachers (STT)”. I decided that I wanted to find out what benefits a carefully planned project but largely uncontrolled classroom might produce.

3. Introduction of the idea of STT in class

Raising awareness for autonomous learning and learner types: Before I started to explain to my students what the rationale of my new project was, we discussed the concept of autonomous learning and how they would rate themselves as independent learners. I had prepared a short questionnaire for them to be filled in and discussed in pairs and as a group. This provided me with the opportunity to introduce ways of how to become more independent in the learning process while, at the same time, I learned about my students’ learning preferences. Furthermore, I had them do a test on learner intelligences adapted from the book *Multiple Intelligencies – New Horizons* by Howard Gardner. (comp. Gardner, 2006) Again, we discussed which learning methods might be suitable for which learner. I was hoping that through discussion of these issues my students would become sensitized to their own needs, and, moreover, be inspired for their roles as teachers.

Explaining the rationale: The next step involved explaining what I hoped to gain from the project for both the students and for myself: more independence regarding the learning process on the students’ side and more knowledge about their learning preferences revealed by how they designed their classes. What I would further learn in the process was which topics and current issues within the taught subject were of interest to them as well as how well they could draw connections to other classes (cross-curricular). I would counsel them in their preparation phase, jump-start them if they ran out of ideas but generally I intended not to interfere with the content and activities they would plan for their classes.

Group formation: I did not interfere in the group formation process. I wanted students to teach in teams of 2 to 3 people per team, not individually. The thinking behind this was that it can be daunting to stand alone in front of the whole class and that one person might tend to lecture more than necessary for an intended interactive class. Another factor was time: The STT project was to make up for a maximum of 5 classes in the semester. As said, I did not group the students. They could choose with whom they wanted to work. Seeing that they would spend much time in preparation together, I wanted them to be in groups where they felt comfortable, accepted, and where they had a common interest. As it turned out group formations went quickly and so did choosing a story of interest.

Guidelines: I tried to keep the guidelines as simple and as non-restrictive as possible. When their turn came, the teaching team was to introduce their topic of choice, keep the theoretical input short – I wanted to avoid the omnipresent PowerPoint presentations – and activate their colleagues by using activities, formulating discussion questions, make up quizzes etc. There were no set boundaries for creativity. The essential requirement was to keep the process of activation going. Teaching time was 60 minutes, followed by peer feedback and self-reflection on part of the teachers.

4. Planning and consultation

From the introduction of the project until the first STT class students had 5 weeks to prepare. I chose this generous timeframe due to their busy schedules. It would give them enough time to get together in teams to brainstorm and discuss ideas, to put together the material they would need for their classes and to consult me for help if necessary. Some students saw me in my office hour, some talked to me before or after classes, I received some e-mail requests but, largely, they were rather independent in their preparation.

5. Teaching a class

Naturally, the first team teachers were in a more difficult situation than the ones who were to follow. Theirs would be a premier and they would set an example for their colleagues. Nevertheless, the teachers who came first did an excellent job. A multitude of creative ways to learn was shown; new ways to summarize a text were introduced, we played pub quizzes, self-made board games, tasted intercultural food, performed role-plays, listened to music, to mention just a few activities.

As it turned out my students' creativity seemed to be limitless. They inspired each other and with each class that they taught the performances improved. The games and activities that they invented made for a great classroom atmosphere in which learning suddenly became easy and took place unnoticed.

6. Assessment, peer evaluation, self-reflection

I spent a significant amount of time contemplating how to assess students' performances. Traditional assessment where mistakes lower a grade does not work. Moreover, STT is a group effort. So the question arises: how can the group performance, which partly reflects a common effort in preparation of content, partly individual teaching skills be fairly assessed. For group assessment I used general criteria, which students knew from the guidelines handed to them at the beginning of the project (relevance of topic chosen, structure of class, methods applied in class). For individual assessment I applied criteria considering the quality of communication such as audibility, liveliness, clarity, body

language, responsiveness to audience. These criteria were also known by the students in advance.

Furthermore, to foster critical thinking skills, students had to evaluate the performance of the teaching team. In this ‘peer feedback’ questions such as How motivated and engaged did you feel? How can you summarize the class in one sentence? were asked. Thus, the team teachers received feedback as to what had been appreciated by their colleagues and what had appealed less right away.

7. Conclusions

What I have tried to achieve in this project can be put into a few words: freedom, independency, autonomy, (self-)reflection, enjoyment of the learning process, all of which could lead to lengthy philosophical discussions.

STT can be seen as an activity that represents a powerful learning environment (PLE) according to vanMerriënboer where students are provided with the possibility of “working on a complex and challenging problem”, namely that of acting as teachers and thus performing in a role as yet unknown to them. The students prepared their task and taught in small teams, thereby fulfilling the second requirement of a powerful learning environment, which is one that offers “opportunities for interaction, communication and cooperation”. As the students were only given loose instructions of how to teach their classes, they were basically given the freedom to “set their own goals” of what they wanted to achieve in class. (van Merriënboer, 2003:3)

I believe that this project can easily and successfully be translated into other classes. The assessment as suggested in this article can be geared towards your own needs. Depending on how familiar students are with independent learning, the introduction to this project can be adapted. I could imagine introducing the constructivist philosophy of learning which claims that people can only understand what they have themselves constructed. (Richardson, 1997:22)

From my own perspective and the feedback I received I believe that the project was a success. Most students appreciated the chance to reverse roles and experience what it feels like to prepare for a class. They were confronted with issues such as time management, the uncertainty of how an audience will respond to activities that they had prepared with effort, spontaneous speaking, and material research. They worked on relevant and current topics and issues regarding their field of work. It was certainly a challenge for my students to work with loose guidelines, to have the freedom that allows much space for creativity but can also make you feel overwhelmed. With freedom comes choice and responsibility. (compare: McCourt, 2005, pp. 252–253) I think that I can safely state that most students used that freedom well, they made responsible choices, prepared, performed and reflected well and reaped the fruit of their labour with excellent classroom atmosphere and eager peers who were looking forward to being taught by their new teachers.

8. References

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