

Tianjin Normal University 60th Anniversary

“Easy Work? The process and Development of Effective Teaching Competencies”

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Abstract: Five key competencies and their cultivation for effective teaching are discussed with a view to their process and development in the act of teaching.

This is my first time in China. It is my honor and privilege to be visiting a country with such a rich cultural history and heritage.

First let me apologize, my formal education was undertaken in England and I apologize if my English is not perfect, but forgive me, I have spent 29 years in the USA!

I am also honored and grateful to be part of your celebration this week as we all celebrate 60 years of education at Tianjin Normal University. I know you have many more years to come.

I am thankful and grateful this will be my 39 year as an educator and yet I still struggle with how to teach to be truly effective. When asked to speak about the cultivation of competencies in teaching, the speech could have taken a number of directions. I have chosen to speak on five specific points that I see as necessary in order to cultivate key competencies.

If cultivation in our future teachers was as simple as following a prescribed formula as we might in a science experiment; a linear step by step process, such as A to B and then C to D, it would be easy.

I believe teaching to be much more complex than a sequential list of points to follow: teaching cannot be reduced to mere science alone.

To be effective it needs a continual renewal and reflection of practice with an understanding of key competencies.

The classroom teacher is the catalyst, the one who inspires, lights a passion and brings the science and the art of learning together. No easy task.

For me, teaching is a craft where the science of teaching meets the art of the teacher.

When I hear the word cultivation, I think of the land and agriculture. If the land is to produce, it needs nurturing – light, water, sun and perhaps most importantly, the quality of soil. It is the same with teaching; we need to cultivate the classroom environment so our students can grow as people and learn content too.

Before we consider the competencies, please don't see them as separate entities as we might in a textbook with chapter headings – they are integrated and connected.

So, here are my five key points to consider when we think of cultivation of key competencies in teaching.

1. Walk the talk, don't talk the talk. That is, be the living role model of the key competencies you seek to teach.
2. Develop active learning strategies where students are engaged – we learn when we are engaged.
3. Know your students or get to know as best as you can; - You cannot teach anyone if you do not know them. Teaching is about personal connections, not just the transfer of content into the cognitive domain.
4. Measure learning on a daily basis with formative assessment strategies –It is not what I teach but what students learn that is key. We need to know what they are learning as we go.

5. Reflection –Without reflection it is merely an experience that limits the Learning opportunity.

Role model- Live the talk don't talk the talk

We cannot talk to our preservice students about the cultivation of key competencies if we ourselves do not live them. Social learning theory tells us we learn what we live or experience. As John Dewey, renowned American educator has stated, our classrooms, are in themselves, mini communities where students learn what they live and will live what they learn. The teacher shapes these mini communities in our own classrooms.

We need as teachers to be intentional, mindful and insightful on how we shape the specific learning environment for our students.

For example, I have watched a fellow professor teaching about discovery learning through a PowerPoint presentation. How ironic it is that we are teaching about the importance of curiosity and to embrace discovery learning in students as they passively sit through a PowerPoint (Should it be powerpointlessness?)

We know industry leaders in the major companies around the world are looking for critical thinkers, curious minds and those who can ask the deep and challenging questions – we will not cultivate this in our own students or the students through the docility of lecture, but through active and engaged classrooms.

Therefore, we must live what you need to cultivate so your students can live what they learn and this in turn leads to my second point, the cultivation of active pedagogy.

We must cultivate and develop active learning strategies where students are engaged – we learn when we are engaged. We need to create the space for students to learn through active pedagogy.

In our classrooms, we can create teacher centered or student centered spaces. Teacher centered spaces put the teacher at the front and center of

the learning experience for students; and if we remember our goal is to have students learn how to become effective teachers they need to experience what learning should be like, as a student, in our very own preservice classrooms.

At present in our own Heidelberg University School of Education, our faculty are presently redesigning the learning spaces to represent teaching and learning for the 21st century that allows for movement, small group work, individual learning and collaboration- the teacher will lead but will develop a series of learning opportunities that ask students to be engaged rather than be passive.

Some students may find this difficult, especially as they are often used to the lecture, note, test format of teaching –it’s easy to “Do School”; that is, go through a process that learns how to memorize information, spit it back on tests and get good grades; But do good grades translate into great teachers? – I’ll let you draw your own conclusions.

There are many student centered learning strategies that we can cultivate in our own preservice teachers that will lead to competencies as a future educator.

Some of the ones I find easy and quick to use and develop are Think, Pair, Share, small group work (with individual and positive Interdependence, collective accountability), spider web discussions, teach back opportunities, peer presentations, and mini action research opportunities.

The key is that students are guided to the learning outcomes through active and engaged activities that put them in the center of the learning experience- experiences where they can challenge each other’s ideas, develop their own questions and build relevance and connection to content.

At the center of each class should be a key essential question or idea that students work towards to give the content meaning, connection and

relevance and requires students to be engaged in working to find an answer.

The Essential question is open-ended, supported by content and is often complex to solve. I recommend reading the work of Grant Wiggins on essential questions to guide the learning process. In addition, Wiggins' concept of backward design when planning lessons, models or courses for learning can be a powerful way forward for learning. Engaged classrooms also help us with our next point of getting to know students.

Get to Know Your Students

Why should we know who are students are when we teach them? Carl Rogers, the American psychologist stated, "we can't teach anyone anything if we don't know them".

Perhaps, one of the most difficult things to do is to get to know students given the numbers of students we teach and the time frame we work in. If our strategies are student-centered, this will inevitably help, as we work in small group settings, probe and question in small groups as students work on open ended essential questions.

Getting to know students is more complex than test scores, grades, and even anecdotal comments. Knowing students goes much deeper than students' test scores that don't reveal a student's potential to learn. Our job is to cultivate passion for learning, motivate students to see the value of the WHY and we cannot do that if we do not know them.

If we are removed from knowing students, we may lose the opportunity to help them succeed. For example, a student may appear to be struggling, she may give the impression that she does not care, appear to be losing interest in the content or even worse, be disengaged in her studies.

The question we now need to ask is, "why is the student's performance and actions looking like road to failure?" We can only try to help find a solution through getting to know students.

The question now becomes one of not lowering teaching standards or expectations but a question of knowing what is going on – some students are wounded, even emotionally wounded, and are struggling. We as teachers have a duty to know them better than a test score or a grade in the book.

There are some simple techniques to cultivate the ways to get to know students, a simple short bio first day of class– ask students to tell us what their passion is, something we might not know about them, their fears and aspirations for the course as future teachers. You become more connected to students when you show them you are authentic and real too. Tell them who you are – you are part of the community too.

The first day of classes I never go over the mechanics of a syllabus – I ask them about themselves and tell them who I am as I stand in front of them; I too have fears, hopes and dreams and they can see that I, like them, are human.

Learning is a risk taking. Showing students you are human is a gateway to let them know who you are and helps create positive interpersonal relationships that are necessary for learning to occur.

Can we really teach content if we only see content and not see the student?

To see the students we need to have regular “checks in” with students during class. This is why the active engaged learning in classroom helps get to know students on a personal level. Observe carefully students in your classroom as they work; use a socio gram to monitor where conversations go – sometimes spend some time at events they take part in such as dramas, music, sports – let them know you were there.

While I know cultural context is important in learning, the human need for personal connection in learning runs across humanity. Getting to know students connects well to our next competency – the use of assessment in the learning process.

Formative Assessment

For me, assessment is perhaps one of the most misunderstood concepts in education.

Is assessment all about test scores, meeting standards, and making sure students can pass a test which we assume is learning? I think we can all agree that we have passed a test without really knowing the material – could we still pass a test a year later, if we cannot, we never learned the material in the first place!

Assessment means, “To sit with the learner as we gather data, to ultimately make a judgement of some kind.”

With this in mind, formative assessment techniques should be the focus for teaching. This means gathering data on a regular basis not so much to give grades, but to assess what students are learning. Furthermore, assessment tells us as much about our teaching. While many teachers might say I taught them what they needed to know; we need to be aware, it is as not about what we teach, it is about what students learn.

We can teach content all we want; thinking well I have covered the content. However, if students are not learning, we as teachers, have missed the mark.

If we leave this critical aspect to a summative assessment – the end of course – we cannot reflect or go back and reteach things that students don't grasp or understand.

There are a number of ways in which to use assessment effectively for student learning. Exit tickets, reflective responses, a KWL Chart, 2 minute open-ended response papers at the end of class. My Favorite is the triangle, square and circle. Three things you learned, four things that square with your thinking about the content, and questions going around in your head. I then use this formative assessment (feedback) as the basis to plan the next lesson or if I students have not learned the content – reteach it in another way.

The formative assessment strategies are as much for me; as they are for my students, as I gauge their learning. My formative assessment process leads to my final competency- reflection.

Reflection

Reflection is a key component of the learning for everyone. How many times do we undertake self-talk when we see something or have done something? Reflection, even at a superficial level is natural.

To cultivate the idea of self-reflection for learning we need to be intentional and provide opportunity for reflection so that it can bring deeper meaning to students as they reflect on the experiences they have undertaken.

For example, a teacher can teach a fantastic lesson, where students are engaged, the teacher believes learning is taking place, thinks what a great lesson and thinks no further. However, there is a mistake here.

True reflective teachers take note and ask, why did this lesson go so well? The teacher identifies the variables she controls in the classroom.

For example, she may consider the type of pedagogy for the specific class, the organization of the space for learning, the small groups and the makeup of the groups. The point is, she reflected back and began to dissect the why and how of the successful lesson rather than thinking what a great lesson and moved on.

Reflection of an experience only becomes learning when we deliberately reflect on its meaning. Without reflection is merely just an experience.

To conclude, a Chinese proverb has stated, a child's life is like a piece of paper on which every person leaves a mark".

If we cultivate the competencies and live the competencies rather than speak them – we will leave an indelible mark that will root deep in students' learning. Much like a farmer who cultivates his own crops for his harvest.

Once again, thank you for your time. It has been my privilege to be here to share my thoughts with you all as we celebrate together the 60th anniversary of Tianjin Normal University.

I wish you all health, happiness and 60 more years of teaching and learning at your great institution. Thank you.