Interactive Learning and Teaching – Reflection

I am a student taught many years ago where classrooms were constructed with desks all in a row facing the central figure and font of all knowledge the teacher, having to memorise facts with hardly any opportunity to apply the new found knowledge to actual situations (Clayton & Gizelis). This traditional formal education introduced rules and patterns of thinking and impeded initiative and natural learning (UniLrn, 2013).Realising soon in my teaching career that that was no longer going to work I embraced the interactive teaching environment. Here students are actively involved in the learning process which promotes critical thinking, or the ability ‘to distinguish the true from the false’ (Kok, 2008). Instead of just passively receiving facts and information, students are connected with their teacher and are actively involved in sharing, questioning and discussion.

During the 1960s Edgar Dale speculated that any information taught has a better chance of being retained and used in Bloom’s higher order learning domains and cognitive processes if it is actively obtained, ie. through direct purposeful, real life experience, as opposed through passive means such as hearing, reading or observing. Students need to be able to connect, interpret and make sense of the newly obtained information (Anderson, ?).

Although more motivational and rewarding, as well as promoting a higher attention span and engagement levels, interactive teaching requires good ‘observation, listening, interpersonal, and intervention skills and abilities by both teacher and students’ (Sakatoon Public Schools, 2009).

During our face-to-face session with Trish we were asked, in small groups, to consider the four different types of interactive teaching methods that can be used to engage students in deeper levels of learning: Case studies, Simulations, Problem-based Learning and Role-play/group work. In our group we felt that all methods interrelate seeing that a simulation is often based on a case study and involves role play/group work with problem based learning often at the heart of it.

Over the past four weeks I have come to the conclusion that interactive and brain friendly teaching techniques go hand-in-hand to enable a student to get more out of an intense workshop and also learned first-hand the benefits of both methods having applied the following interactive and brain-friendly teaching techniques:

* Workshop room set up – a learning space should be flexible to provide for teaching pedagogies, creative to inspire students and teachers alike, and supportive to maximise students’ potential (JISC, 2006). For our workshop we preferred flexibility and space for café style set-up to support a teaching approach that fostered participant engagement through active discussion and collaboration. Delivering a workshop in a lecture theatre, devoid of natural light and standard rows of chairs produced little opportunity for participants to have eye contact, which ‘is key to fruitful discussions’ (Edutopia, 2012) and as such reduced the prospect of our preferred method of teaching and learning through dialogue, peer problem solving and information sharing.
* Interactive discussions between participants and between participants and facilitator was highly stimulated and facilitated. Learning through discussion could provide participants with the opportunity to learn about and contribute to the subject matter and link it with daily work scenarios and as such also facilitate their individual analytical skills (Rabow, 1994).
* A guiding PowerPoint presentation which was in the background as it ‘is most effective as a visual accompaniment to the spoken word, not as the vehicle for all of the content of a lecture’ (Uoregon) and as such text was minimal and slides contained mostly photos, pictures or diagrams.

Making a workshop interactive involved more preparation time but was in the end very gratifying. Both participants and facilitator seemed to get far more out of the session compared to students listening passively to a lecturer standing at the front. I found that the first 15 minutes were extremely important to create the right environment for the rest of the session. If during the alternative introduction part, where participants had to introduce not themselves but someone at their table, participants connected, then the ice was broken and a comfortable, relaxing learning environment was created, and lots of discussion would take place. Some participants sat stoically in their chair and didn’t seem overly happy having to do any introductions let alone talk to another person or the rest of the group. However, a table question associated with the introductions completely unrelated to the topic, such as favourite holiday destination or tv program, got tongues moving and produced laughter.

For me, a teacher-learner interaction classroom, where students play a major role and the teacher acts as a guide or facilitator, is the way to go. Hopefully time will be on my side to create interactive sessions every time.

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