Observation: How to Effectively Approach Teaching Adult Learners

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EHRD 616: Methods of Teaching Adults

Texas A&M University, Spring 2011
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Observation: How to Effectively Approach Teaching Adult Learners

Stigler and Hiebert (1999) stated that “Teaching is the one process in the educational system that is designed specifically to facilitate students’ learning” (p. 3). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the role of adult teachers in classrooms, particularly because of the emphasis on dialogic learning between the students, their teachers and peers. At times, teachers may be considered as knowers or masters in a relationship with students. However, it is recognized that more and more students are learning through dialogue with each other in collaborative learning settings.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore different teaching styles and perspectives by observing two professors from different fields and to learn the effective teaching approaches for adult learners. By observing two different professors, I could reflect on my teaching methods and learn how to improve them. Through this paper, I pointed out how students’ different learning styles can be treated effectively by professors’ different teaching methods. Next, I explored the overall effective instructional practices based on Vella’s (2002) twelve principles. These three main questions will guide this paper:

1. How do professors teach students differently with their teaching perspectives?
2. How do diverse teaching methods satisfy students’ different learning styles and needs?
3. What are the overall effective instructional practices based on Vella’s (2002) twelve principles for adult learning?
Overview

This paper will discuss how and why I selected two professors in different fields and what criteria were focused while I was observing them. In finding, I stressed the main three sections from observations and connect those ideas to literature. The first section will provide the information of different teaching perspectives and find evidences through the observation of two professors. The second section will share the findings of students’ diverse learning styles and how professors could accommodate such different qualities in students. The last section will discuss about the effective instructional practices according to my evaluation that was designed based on Vella’s (2002) twelve principles. In the discussion, I will analyze those findings and write my thoughts on what I learned about adult teaching and learning. Finally, I will summarize the key points of learning through this project in a conclusion.

Method

To meet the research purpose, I selected a professor at the Department of Chemistry of Texas A&M University. I emailed the Center for Teaching Excellence and one of the staff members recommend Dr. K, who is a presidential professor for Teaching Excellence & Piper Professor for 2010. After I received the approval, I observed Dr. K for four consecutive lectures. The observations totaled 6 hours. Then, to compare and contrast the different teaching methods and content between professors, I asked Dr. E, who is a professor at the Department of Human Resource Development (HRD) at Texas A&M University. Dr. E teaches Career Development in HRD. I observed Dr. E throughout the whole course because it was a required course for me and it fit my interests. I received approval from Dr. E for both observation and informal interviews about his point of view of teaching and learning. While observing these two professors, I designed an evaluation sheet in order to evaluate effectively and purposefully. Vella’s (2002) 12 principles were used in criteria as a guideline to adult
teaching and learning (See Appendix A). After observing, I had a chance to interview some students about their feedback of the course and the professor. The following table is the summary chart that involves information of two professors.

Table 1
Summary of Two Observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dr. K</th>
<th>Dr. E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subject/ Content</strong></td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>Career Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group Characteristic</strong></td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group Size</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings**

**Different Teaching Perspectives**

I attempted to find out the professors’ teaching perspectives because most of the research on effective teaching today admits that teaching techniques and methods are only the tip of the iceberg and we should understand the teachers’ intentions and beliefs which are beneath the surface (Pratt, 1999). Pratt (1999) defined teaching perspective as “a set of actions, intentions, and beliefs related to knowledge, learning, and the role of a teacher, instructor, or professional whose role involves instructing others” (p.1). The five perspectives are (a) transmission: effective delivery of content; (b) apprenticeship: modeling ways of being; (c) developmental; cultivating ways of thinking; (d) nurturing: facilitating self-efficacy and (e) social reform: seeking a better society. Based upon my observations, I have discovered that more than one teaching perspective had been discovered and it was not difficult to point out the dominant teaching perspectives for both professors. Dr. K possessed a transmission perspective. On the other hand, Dr. E dominantly held a nurturing perspective
as well as developing perspective.

Dr. K’s transmission perspective is evident through her substantial knowledge to the subject and the level of mastery over the content. It was shown that she spent a lot of time in preparation on resources and she wanted to make sure all contents can be delivered to the students. Ross-Gordon (2002) stated that the goal of teachers who have the transmission perspective is to pass on to learners a specific body of knowledge or skill as efficiently and effectively as possible. Dr. K utilized different techniques to convey the content. Not only did she show slides through the projectors, but also she asked students to see other materials that she developed. She used the textbook that she designed, which had explanation of the subject and illustrations with various charts, tables and pictures. One outstanding difference from normal textbooks was that all her comments were written in hand-writing in the textbook. Her comments had some tips to help students understand effectively and memorize the concept efficiently. She added assignments and example test parts where students can apply their learning and assess their performance. I interviewed a couple of students and they reported these assignments are helpful because they know where their weak parts are before taking the actual test. Likewise, her efforts aligned well with the objectives of the transmission teacher.

On the other hand, it is observed that Dr. E focused on the development of learners rather than his teaching performance. First of all, the evidence was shown from his way of encouraging students to connect learning to their experiences. This was helpful because connecting to individuals’ past experiences makes it easier for learners to remember the content longer and to understand better. For instance, he often asked questions like, “Who can tell your experience if you had a chance to use any Career Development (CD) tools to assess your characteristic and interests? How was it and why?” instead of explaining all different CD tools of their benefits and disadvantages. In this way, teachers can introduce learners to
the “essence” of the content that engage what the students already know and expand their ways of thinking (Pratt, 1999). Pratt (1999) also noted that teaching should focus on helping learners construct personal meaning and true learning and understanding can only occur when learners find for personal meaning by organizing information into an integrated and structured whole. Therefore, as one of effective ways to teach, Pratt (1999) addressed that teachers should help learners think and problem solve in ways that resemble expert thinking or problem solving.

Through observation, it is also found that Dr. E possessed a nurturing perspective in his teaching. The goal of a nurturing perspective is to help students become more confident and self-sufficient learner (Pratt, 1999). The role of teachers in this kind of classes is no longer “the sage on the stage” but the “guide by the side”; in such settings, the teacher acts as “facilitator” or co-participant (Clifton, 2006). Not only did Dr. E encourage students to speak during the discussion in class, but also he cared individuals’ needs and gave advice outside the classroom. For instance, Dr. E and I have spent one hour a week and he encouraged me to be more confident and able in order to pursue my learning goals. He provide different strategies that I can use for my learning goals, such as a strategic planning method to evaluate my Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT). He suggested me to set the achievable goal for weekly basis and helped me to take action on a plan and gave feedback to set a new plan/goal after one week. During the interview with Dr. E, he claimed, “My strong point is to assist students to achieve their goal and I feel happy when I see their achievement.” Pratt (2002) acknowledged that nurturing teachers support and encourage students as well as help individuals set achievable goals.
Teaching Learners with Different Learning Styles

All teachers appear to hold a set of beliefs about individual differences among students. Many U.S. teachers believe that individual differences are an obstacle to effective teaching (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Meeting each students’ needs indicates that diagnosing each student’s level of performance and different learning styles and providing different instruction and teaching methods for different levels (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Furthermore, Grasha and Reichman (1974) postulates that learning takes place in social context and therefore learning style can be observed by the way students behaves and responses to the social-learning environment. The six learning styles are categorized by Grasha and Reichman (1974) as follows; (a) Independent: Students prefer to work alone and need little direction or attention from lecturer; (b) Avoidant: Students with high rate of absenteeism; (c) Dependent: Students depend heavily on lecturer and friends in learning task; (d) Collaborative: Students who find group work enjoyable; (e) Participative: Students who are attentive and responsive to course work requirements and (f) Competitive: Students emphasize on high grades and attention from lecturer.

Not only that, adult learning styles such as visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic are well-known learning types of learner developed by Pues (2004). Pues (2004) stressed that if instructors and students identify the person’s learning styles, learning is much more efficient and long-lasting so it helps both learners and teachers. This is why many researchers address that it is imperative that lecturer realized the diverse learning style among students and conduct instruction and evaluation technique that matches the different learner in their class (Amir & Jelas, 2010).

Most teachers in the United States use visual device to focus students’ attention (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Dr. K also used overhead projectors to display information in written or graphic form while describing it orally. This observation is not a new revelation but
it was different that she had three projectors heading toward different side of walls and used the middle projector to explain material and moved the slide sheet to the next two projectors for those students who have not understood or taken notes. For Dr. E, he used power points, white board and videos to focus students’ attention. Dr. E did not use too many slides because he enjoyed leading discussions and asking various questions without slides. Both professors focused on visual and auditory learner rather than tactile or kinesthetic learners.

**Principles for Effective Adult Learning**

**Sound relationships.** When I was observing the first day of Dr. E’s class, everyone was new and felt the disconnection among classmates. Dr. E prepared an ice-breaker activity to create relationships among adult learners. Chlup and Collins (2010) noted that ice-breakers help students to build rapport and create safe classrooms for learning where everyone feels comfortable participating. Dr. E limited the ice-breaker time to 1 minute per person and made students share what they would like to change about their behavior and share advice on how to change it. This activity was well matched to the course introduction which was about changing behavior. It also led students to establish trustworthy relationships by sharing ideas and personal concerns.

**Sequence and reinforcement.** Both Dr. E and Dr. K followed principle of sequence and reinforcement, “from easy to difficult, from simple to complex” (Vella, 2002). Dr. K began her lecture with simple examples or concepts of the chapter in chemistry and developed those concepts into challenging procedures. Dr. E also started his lesson with examples of Career Development from personal examples and explained Career Development theories at the end of the class. As Vella (2002) mentioned, both professor repeated facts, skills, and attitudes in diverse, engaging, and interesting ways until learners are learned. For instance, Dr. E always checked after his summary, “Does it make sense to
you?” and Dr. K often asked “What do you think about it?” or “Did you understand?” to students in order to assess their learning.

**Needs assessment and immediacy.** Adult learners see the immediate usefulness of new learning such as the skills, knowledge, or attitudes they are working to acquire (Vella, 2002). After he assessed the students’ needs in the beginning, Dr. E did his best to connect learning to be applicable in the real world. For instance, knowing that most of the students are working in organizations or going to work in the near future, he planned his Career Development course focusing on organizational career development that can be applied to their real lives. He also provided substantial materials that deal with our real life issues and can stimulate our interests.

**Engagement and teamwork.** One other point that was seen through the observation of Dr. E is that he put emphasis on engagement and teamwork. He delivered dialogue education by leading open-questions among groups. This certainly helped students to be actively engaged and to enhance their learning tasks. He also designed teamwork to encourage students to solve difficult tasks with each other and led a win-win situation. It is observed that Dr. E formed a desk and chairs within groups to facilitate group work. In the beginning and at the end of the class, he asked questions and encouraged us to solve the questions within group members. Vella (2002) also noted that teams invite the welcome energy of competition and learning is enhanced by peers and a team.

**Discussions**

**Effective Teaching Perspectives**

There has been a criticism of conventional pedagogy that centers on a teacher who does little more than deliver context to students (Palmer, 2007). This is because teachers are
assuming that the students do not have enough knowledge or ability to learn by themselves. For instance, Dr. K’s transmission perspectives caused some issues with students’ participation and development of their critical thinking skills related to chemistry. While she delivered the content through a projector, most of the students wrote down what they saw and heard, but they were not encouraged to think critically about the material because no questions were asked. This might be due to several factors: (a) the large size of the group, (b) the subject matter’s characteristics, or (c) the professor’s habitual teaching style, which could be influenced by previous learning background. The survey results researched by Grasha (1994) show that teaching styles can vary depending on the subjects matter’s characteristics, faculty rank and course level.

On the other hand, Dr. E respected students’ ideas and experiences regarding his subject so he stimulated student discussion and provoked critical thinking about the questions. His role of facilitator was made easier by the smaller class size in combination with the fact that his students were experienced in both life and subject matter. Dr. E was open to all students’ comments and experiences and he attempted to learn from students as well. However, Dr. E admitted in his interview that it is sometimes challenging to synthesize and generalize all different answers and perspectives from students’ personal experiences. His comment is understandable because Vella (2002) also stated that the facilitator has no control over what the students will say or how they will respond to the questions but I thought it is still important that he values high on individuals' various perspectives from their lives.

Likewise, I believe students and the act of learning should be more emphasized than the teachers who are delivering. Palmer (2007) stated that “the student is regarded as a reservoir of knowledge to be tapped, students are encouraged to teach each other, the standards of accountability emerge from the group itself, and the teacher’s role varies from
facilitator to co-learner to necessary evil” (p.118). Therefore, these findings of my paper show that Dr. E demonstrated the qualities of a facilitator and co-learner.

**Teaching Learners Effectively Dealing with Various Learning Styles**

There has been research by Truluck and Courtenay (1999) that there were no significant effects found between learning style preferences and gender, age, or educational level. This indicates that adult learners have various learning styles and not all older learners are active, hands-on learners as adult education literature suggests (Truluck & Courtenay, 1999). Many other researchers have found that learners have different learning styles (Amir & Jelas, 2010). This implies that researchers and adult educators should aware the importance of individuals’ different learning styles. There were several efforts that Dr. K and Dr. E made to meet those diverse learning styles, but I would like to write some comments on findings.

Dr. K presented her content with three projectors in order to meet visual learners. Using three slides of visual aid certainly helped students learn. However, it seemed difficult to keep students’ attention directed toward the information of the moment. I found that students were not focused on what Dr. K presented at the moment but paid attention to the information on the previous slide. Many teacher-training programs offer advice on using projectors or presentation tools to show the items being presented, but they advise covering the last items in order to retain students’ attention (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). I thought even though her efforts and considerations for students who missed the part were great, I wanted to recommend her to focus on one slide to retain students’ attention and better participation.

In order to satisfy the individual different learning styles, I suggest that assessment methods should include both individual and group assignments. This is to cater the diverse learners in lecture halls. Dr. E and Dr. K both assigned different in-class or homework assignments throughout the semester. For instance, those students who are independent and
self-regulated learn best by doing self-study with little guidance. In this case, the students would prefer lectures that give individual task where they can work on their own. Some students, on the other hand, will benefit more from a well-structured lecture, guidance and concrete hands-on experiences. Additionally, collaborative learners will find group work enjoyable. This is why I found it is effective for professors to prepare variety of choices on assignments and integrated different assignments in order to meet students’ various needs and styles. Therefore, by observing and interviewing several students, I learned that students use a variety of approaches to learning that may not match the professor’s approaches, so it is important for adult educators to design various options on assessment methods.

**Principles for Effective Adult Learning**

When I was observing two professors with criteria of Vella’s (2002) twelve teaching principles, I found one common theme in each component that is treating learners as subject. Vella (2000) mentioned that the important thing she learned is people are the subjects, or decision makers, not only of their own learning but also in their lives. This is why adult educators should value individuals’ experience and design the course based on students’ need and their goal. These principles guided not only the design of learning tasks, but also every aspect in terms of adult learners. Vella (2000) suggested that teachers should respect adult learners by knowing their context and situation and by the practice of doing a learning needs assessment with learners prior to a course is needed to respect the adults.

I thought communication between students and teachers will benefit educators to keep these twelve principles because it is sometimes difficult to reflect their own teaching. By receiving a sincere feedback from adults will help teachers to better respect learners as the subject. This is why I interviewed several students to see whether they are satisfied with their learning or not. For instance, some students from Dr. E’s class said a portion of group
discussion on personal experience was too large that students had hard time to understand the actual theories in the text book. They suggested that it would be better if Dr. E can spend a longer time in exploring those difficult concepts of the theory. If the professors are open to students’ needs and feedback, I believe that the quality of teaching would be much more enhanced.

Conclusion

To conclude, I found that observation is a great strategy to learn and think about others’ different teaching perspectives and methods. This chance allowed me to think about my own teaching perspectives and reflect on my teaching methods I have been using. The comparison with my teaching to other two professors encouraged me to see what strategies can be effective to encourage students’ learning and their engagement. Observations also allowed me to gain insights on issues of dealing with the students who have different learning styles. It was great to see that Vella’s (2002) twelve principles were actually implemented in two professors’ teaching and these findings encouraged me to keep the twelve principles in mind and teach adults effectively with these principles in the future. Overall, observing both Dr. K and Dr. E have been a treasured experience because I could understand difference styles within teachers and learn the vast amount of knowledge from their practical teaching in the class.
Appendix A. Evaluation: Twelve Principles for Effective Adult Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Needs Assessment</td>
<td>Listening to learners’ needs help shape a program that has immediate usefulness to adults.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Safety is a principle linked to respect for learners as decision makers of their own learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound Relationships</td>
<td>Sound relationships for learning involve respect, safety, open communication, listening, and humility.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequence and Reinforcement</td>
<td>Sequence: from easy to difficult, from simple to complex. Reinforcement: The repetition of facts, skills, and attitudes in diverse, engaging, and interesting ways until learners are learned.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praxis</td>
<td>Praxis is doing with built-in reflection.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for Learners as Decision Makers</td>
<td>Healthy adults desire to be subjects or decision maker rather than being treated as objects.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas, Feelings, Actions</td>
<td>Learning with the mind, emotions, and muscles and giving attention to the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediacy</td>
<td>Adult learners need to see the immediate usefulness of new learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Roles</td>
<td>Recognition of the impact of clear roles in the communication between learner and teacher.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>Teamwork provides safety for undertaking the difficult tasks into a win-win situation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Learning actively to enhance learning tasks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>A synthesis principle that the teacher is responsible to teach what he or she has promised learners will learn.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
References


