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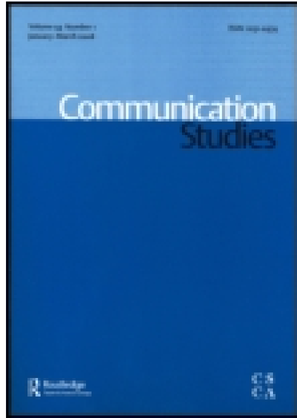

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Central states outstanding teaching award winners wisdom, eloquence, and a little bit of yourself: A philosophy for teaching

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CENTRAL STATES OUTSTANDING TEACHING AWARD WINNERS

WISDOM, ELOQUENCE, AND A LITTLE BIT OF YOURSELF: A PHILOSOPHY FOR TEACHING

PAAIGE K. TURNER

Wisdom without eloquence has been of little help to states, but eloquence without wisdom has often been a great obstacle and never an advantage. Cicero (Kennedy, 1980, p. 91)

The above quotation is my touchstone. It embodies what I want my students to learn and who I want to be as a teacher. If, as a researcher, I focus only on wisdom, my students may not present their ideas in an effective and engaging manner. If, as a teacher of speech, I focus only on eloquence, my students may persuade without understanding what it is they are advocating. This quotation also reminds me that I must continually strive to be both eloquent and wise so that my students will want to engage material that challenges and enhances their understanding of symbolic practices. In this article I will describe how the above quotation shapes my teaching and share some of the specific activities and strategies I use in the classroom to enhance learning. This will be done in a manner consistent with how I would actually teach these ideas in the classroom. That is, I have grouped ideas together under headings, included stories as well as key points, explained my rationale for why I do things, and shared a bit of myself.

Over the past ten years I have been fortunate to have many teachers whose wisdom and eloquence have inspired me to forge my own teaching philosophy. Dr. David Frank could hold a class of 150 spell-bound as he discussed Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero with anima (life/spirit). Dr. Linda Putnam's outlines of organizational communication theory created order out of chaos. Dr. Edward Schiappa's discussion questions gently guided me through Rorty and Heideggar. Dr. Robin Clair weaved stories through and around feminist theory while we explored the aesthetic by painting our nails in class. These individuals, and so many more, are reflected in my approach to teaching and the activities described herein.

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS CO-CONSTRUCT THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

While students and teachers begin with formal roles in the classroom, a learning environment emerges from the interactive dynamics wherein teachers become learners and learners become teachers. As a teacher it is my responsibility to help students see this relationship. On the first day of class I do two things designed to promote this relationship. First, after I have discussed my expectations of the students (i.e., through the syllabus), I ask what their expectations are of the course and me. We then discuss how all of our expectations can be met through both of our actions. Second, we discuss whether learning is an active or passive activity and what behaviors create active and passive learning environments.

The first time I did this exercise I was surprised that the students did not come up with a single expectation. I jokingly asked them if they expected me to shower

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everyday. After the laughter died down, I asked them to bring a list of expectations to the next class period. Their expectations were very reasonable: Be in my office during office hours. Return papers in a reasonable time. Provide guidelines or examples of how to complete assignments. Announce how much of their large report they should have finished on specific dates. Treat them with respect.

After writing their expectations on the board, I explained that one of the worst things that can happen in an organization is for management to solicit feedback and then not respond. Therefore, I tell my students that there are some things I can do, some things I can't do, and some things I won't do. As we go over the list of expectations, I identify which I can, can't, or won't do and provide reasons for the latter two. For example, I *can't* return papers the next class period because I need at least a weekend to grade them. I *won't* monitor the progress on their large report because it is inconsistent with my belief that college students are adults who can make decisions about whether they need to be in class or when they need to work on an assignment. (Subsequently, I have no attendance policy except in public speaking courses.)

I have found an unexpected benefit to being both a teacher and a learner; I get to make, admit, and fix mistakes. In any given semester I will inevitably add someone's score wrong, try a new activity that is not successful, leave something off the syllabus, or explain a concept in a way that is misleading. In the last situation I have asked the students to wait until the next class period so that I can come up with a new explanation, asked if someone in the class can do a better job, or have brought in an "I BLEW IT" handout with a better description. In each of these instances my students have been forgiving, they have seen that people can make and fix mistakes, and I have become a better teacher as I strive to avoid making the same mistake again. Conversely, I respect and forgive their mistakes. If the printer dies or they have forgotten a due date, I believe them until it becomes unreasonable to do so. At that point in time I tell them that I will not (i.e., can, can't, won't) continue to accept their behavior and explain the consequences if it continues in the future.

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STUDENTS LEARN IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Just as Aristotle advocated using all the available means of persuasion in a given instance, I try to use all the means available to help students understand the concepts we discuss in class. In order to do this, I shift between linear and narrative forms of presentation, lecture and interaction, and discussion and note-taking opportunities.

My first step in preparing a lesson plan, similar to that of Dr. Putnam, is to outline the assigned readings and insert any additional information that is relevant into my lecture. These outlines are then constructed into a master outline for the subject or course. For example, in Research Methods we spend three weeks discussing the parts of a research article. Each day the students help me reconstruct the master outline on the left side of the chalkboard: Title, Abstract, Introduction, Research Question, Methods, Analysis, Results, Discussion, References, Appendix. I then pull out the section for that day and construct a new outline for that section (i.e., I. Abstract; A. Purpose of study, B. Method of study, C. Results, D. Implications).

There are several benefits to this process. First, since my lecture notes begin with their readings, I ensure that lectures link to and extend the course reading material. Second, students repeatedly hear and recall important concepts. Third, students can visually and aurally process the material. Fourth, since students will hear concepts

more than once, I can reduce their anxiety about getting it right the first time. Whenever I introduce a difficult concept for the first time, I identify the level of understanding I expect them to have and when they should begin to be concerned. For example, the first time I use the word *operationalize* I expect them to understand it at about 10% (meaning they can say the word with me) and ask them to raise their hands if they have it at that level. Each time we discuss the concept I raise the percentage until we reach 80%. At that point any student who does not feel that they understand the concept at 80% should begin to seek additional help. I am always amazed at the physical signs of relief when I set the level at 10% and the signs of confidence when we reach 80%.

The challenge is learning to be flexible. In a dynamic learning environment students will come up with ideas and insights that I hadn't thought of but that need to be incorporated into the master outline. It can get a little confusing as each section of a class varies from my original outline, but I have found that asking the students what letter or Roman numeral they have in their notes usually straightens us out.

While outlining works well for students who learn linearly, it is not as effective for students who grasp concepts more readily in a narrative format or for those times when I want students to experience the affective dimension of a concept. At these times I ask students to put down their pens and listen. An example of this is the fishing story I use to illustrate reliability and validity during Research Methods. If you have a pond with three types of fish (students pick) and you catch catfish over and over, then your lure is reliable. If you want to catch catfish, your lure is valid as well. If, however, you wanted to catch trout, you lure is reliable but not valid. At the conclusion of this story we begin the *note-taking opportunity*; students pickup their pens and pencils, and we create an outline of the key features of reliability and validity. I tell this story every time the issue of reliability or validity comes up. Each time I add a little more information, such as how reliable you need to be in a social science study or the relationship between reliability and validity. I also raise the expected percentage of understanding.

Dr. Clair not only tells a story to illustrate reliability and validity, but also brings a dartboard into the classroom so that students will live the experience. The telling of a story can ignite the imagination, but I have found that enacting the story brings back the visual element that many students rely upon. I therefore use interactive and physical teaching techniques as much as possible. For example, during the first class period of Research Methods I ask students to write down how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich; then other students *try* to follow those directions with actual peanut butter, jelly, and bread. We discuss how a methods section serves as a set of directions that must be explicit enough for someone else to replicate. As the course progresses, we return to this framework for other ideas and discuss the concepts of *population* and *sampling* in terms of chunky or smooth peanut butter. When discussing sampling error, I bring in a bowl of M&M's. Students then "sample from the population" and calculate the standard error. (I also bring extra since the sample tends to suffer from mortality.)

The students' favorite is when I tap-dance on the front desk to illustrate the difference between objective and subjective approaches. We first outline (note-taking opportunity) the definitions of the two approaches. I ask them to describe the features that make the item at the front of the classroom a table. They list things such as the legs and a flat surface. I then climb on top of the table and start tap-dancing (check your head room). I ask the students, "What is it now?" They usually say a stage, and as I continue to stand on the table, we talk about how that is a subjective approach. I then say, "If, however, we were to return back to the objective approach, I would just be

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some fool dancing on a table." While the activity glosses over some of the finer distinctions, my enthusiasm and anima ignites the students' desire to know more, just as Dr. Frank did for me as an undergraduate at the University of Oregon. The next time I teach Research Methods I am looking forward to bringing in my children's fishing game.

As a student I would continually ask questions in class, but as a teacher I have come to realize that not all students learn the way I did. A teaching assistant asked me last year, "How can points for participation be equitable for students who don't or can't talk in class?" A student wrote on an exam many years ago that, although he never said a word in class, he learned a great deal. These two separate events merged and made me realize that when we define participation as only talking in class we are reifying one form of interaction or personality. I now define participation in multiple ways that include finding examples of concepts in the media and bringing them to class, providing evaluations of another student's work, attending outside lectures or events, writing short essays to me via email or posting them on a discussion board, and talking in class. As I have expanded my definition of participation, my students have expanded the ways that I understand class material and the means I have available to teach other students.

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STUDENTS WANT TO LEARN

Several times one semester I shifted the due date for an assignment in my Organizational Communication course. Each time the date approached, I felt that the students were not ready to complete it. Finally, on the day after discussing McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y management styles, I told the students that I trusted them to complete the assignment when they were ready to do so. A student from the back raised his hand and with a look of pride on his face said, "That would be Theory Y, right? You believe that we want to work in order to self-actualize." My heart pounded and a smile broke across my face. He had summarized and enacted a basic belief of mine, namely that students want to learn. Learning, however, is more than just getting it right on the test. Students want to know 1) that they are learning and 2) why they are learning[1].

Students forget how hard they work and how much they learn unless it is made apparent to them. I have seen the sense of accomplishment and the recognition of how much they have learned in my students' faces when I ask one of them to read aloud their essay and they see respect in their classmates' eyes[2]. Or when they make a comment that is so insightful that I stop class, write it and their name into my lecture notes, and announce that in the future I will give them credit for the idea. Or when they tell me about a discussion outside of class where they used class concepts and I ask them to wait and share this conversation with the entire class. In all of these situations, we are publicly acknowledging and celebrating the learning that is occurring so that students can see it in themselves and their classmates.

It isn't enough for students to just know that they are learning; they want to know why they are learning. Too often students (and professors) are asked to do things without understanding the expectations or reasons for performing. When discussing assignments and readings, I tell students why I have chosen that particular activity and how I believe they will benefit. This also helps to reduce anxiety levels, since they now have some means for gauging my expectations. For example, during my lecture on writing a long abstract or annotated bibliography, someone inevitably asks why he or

she can't just copy the article and carry it around. I tell them that my goal for this assignment is to help them develop the cognitive ability to take lengthy, abstract materials and narrow them down to the key issues. We then discuss situations where this skill would be useful, such as in graduate school when writing literature reviews or in industry when writing executive summaries or reports. Similarly, before beginning the class on how to write a reference section, I show them a reference section that conforms to APA guidelines and one that does not. Students then are asked to evaluate the ethos of the different authors. All of these activities show students that there is a reason for the courses they are required to take, that they are learning, and that they will have something to offer the world upon graduation.

REMEMBER WHAT IT WAS TO BE A STUDENT

As I write my students' expectations on the board during the first day of a class, I try to be sure that I am the type of teacher I would have wanted. Subsequently, I have taken specific steps to address some of the concerns I felt as a student. And just like when explaining an assignment, I tell my students what motivates me to do each of these things while acknowledging that they may have different needs that I would be happy to discuss.

Do I know enough for the test?

My goal on all exams is to test students on what they know, not what they don't know–and I tell them my goal. The idea for this practice came from my preliminary exams when Dr. Schiappa asked me to write my own question. During the exam I realized that the structure of my question wasn't consistent with my beliefs, and instead of answering it, I explained why it was the wrong question. I could have failed the question, but instead Dr. Schiappa commended me for looking beyond the question.

On the exam I use two different techniques to get at what students know. First, since the answer to a multiple-choice question often depends upon a specific set of assumptions, students can write any assumptions they have next to the question. I read the assumption first and determine if it is reasonable. If it is, I then grade the question based upon the assumption. If they chose not to write their assumptions, they cannot challenge a question once the test is finished[3]. Second, in my upper division classes I usually have a question that asks the student to select one concept they have not dealt with on the exam and convince me that they understand it. I am amazed at the amount of detail and insight I see on this question.

Even before the test I try to keep students focused upon what they have achieved. My students and I agree on a study session time before each exam. These typically last only an hour or so. While I am not sure that we really learn anything new, students report that just hearing other students ask questions either encourages them, since they knew the answer, or motivates them, since they didn't even know that we had discussed that material.

Am I good enough?

At every stage of my academic career I have always believed that I didn't know enough and that once THEY asked THE QUESTION I would be exposed.... but they never seem to ask that exact question. I have since learned that almost every student feels that way and have come to believe that the design of our educational system perpetuates this feeling. While I can't fix the system, I can do for my students

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what Dr. Frank did for me the day he took me aside and said, "You are going to graduate school, aren't you?" Or when Dr. Clair told me that she felt I was a colleague, not a student. Whenever I notice something, positive or negative, about a student, I check to see if my perception is correct and then initiate a discussion in an appropriate setting. For example, after students repeatedly miss class I call them to see if they are all right and when they will be returning. When students display a propensity for statistics, I ask them if they would like recommendations for upper division classes.

It only takes an extra moment to write on a test that I am impressed by their performance or that I am disappointed that they didn't perform as well as they wanted. In the latter situation I ask them to come see me, and we identify the problem areas. When I first began this practice, I was concerned that I was adding to the student's anxiety. Over time, however, I found that this type of interaction actually reduces anxiety. Low performing students are more likely to stop attending class if I don't talk with them. They know they haven't performed well, and they usually find the opportunity to talk about it and explain any extenuating circumstances as an opportunity to save face. Or on occasion students have told me that they are perfectly happy with their level of performance, and we both relax since they are adults who can set their own standards.

WISDOM, ELOQUENCE, AND A LITTLE BIT OF YOURSELF

In this article I have provided some of the ideas and activities that I try to bring into the classroom as well as acknowledge a few of the people who have guided me. Underlying all of these is my belief that my students and I are joyous, fallible people learning together and that when we feel proud, excited, or disappointed we should share that. I don't always feel eloquent when I am dancing on a table, nor do I feel wise when I forget to bring in the handouts that the students need to complete the next assignment. There are those days when my third eye watches me in front of the classroom and a little voice in my head says, "They don't understand, and they are bored." Then there are the other days–the days when every student raises his or her hand indicating they understand a concept at the 100% level and I know they do. Or the days like one many years ago when a student, who previously stammered and struggled his way through two minutes of a three-minute speech, received a standing ovation from his classmates for an eight-minute persuasive speech that was wise, eloquent, and very much a part of himself.

NOTES

[1]If this were a lecture, we would be moving from the narrative to the note-taking opportunity. In fact, when I lecture I will often make these types of asides to point out things that I expect them to do or not do. For example, if I am using the overhead projector I will turn it off and explain that it is important to put away visual aids once you are finished with them.

[2] This also reduces the number of grade challenges I receive since they can hear and compare theirs with an "A" essay.

[3]Again, this reduces the number of grade challenges I receive.

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