_____

Crossing the Walls of the Classroom; Enhancing Autonomous Learning and Critical Thinking in Teaching Literature

Abo El Nagah, Hadeer PhD, FHEAUK

Associate Professor

Prince Sultan University, Riyadh

Abstract:

Preparing students for real life experience and the challenges of tomorrow's workplace a drastic change has to happen to curriculum design, teaching methodologies and student evaluation approaches. In order to prepare students for real life situations where advanced resourcefulness, critical abilities and decision making skills are highly needed, traditional approaches to teaching like lecturing and instructor's centered pedagogy are no longer sufficient or practical. The shift in emphasis from what the teacher does to what the student can do is a crucial target now more than ever before. Such shift is not novel in the field of education as it was introduced for quite some time by Tyler 1949, and Shuell 1986, for instance. Yet, the application is what really needs development, and more efforts in bringing this concept in practice are certainly required. Lecturing, "talking" and even researching certain topics within the course are no longer sufficient to prepare the students for real life situations and therefore deemed most students unlikely to achieve course ILOs (intended Learning Outcomes) (Biggs & Tang 2007). In order to increase the likelihood that students will achieve the course ILOs, a major change in the method of delivery is suggested as crossing the boundaries of the classroom became strongly advisable. Enhancing students' engagement in learning activities that are purposely costumed increases the optimum of achieving the course ILOs. It also augmented their readiness to succeed in work and real life environment. Literature can be a medium through which a bridge to real life can be made to enhance the students' ability to disseminate knowledge and utilize the learnt skills in daily life situations. The teaching approaches are thus needed to be readjusted and geared towards unleashing the students' creative abilities and liberate them from the confinement of the traditional classroom learning constructs. Vygotsky's idea of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) 1978, Fisher's critical thinking and social communication and an adaptation of Baugh, Brickley and Perryman 2006 "Study Diamond" in literature are employed here as the theoretical foundations of this action research.

Keywords: Autonomous learning, Creative teaching, critical thinking, student's engagement, teaching literature.

_____

INTRODUCTION:

Teaching at the twenty first century has to take a different direction that prepares the students to face the daily challenges and the changing job market. Yesterday's teaching methods and

_____

approaches will not be sufficient to equip our students with the necessary tools of today or those of tomorrow. There is nothing more boring for a student than listening to a lecture or to a power point presentation that can be viewed at home or even on his/her way to class. It has to be acknowledged that our students today are different from those we were teaching ten years ago. As the world is changing towards a more practical and rapid world, there will be no room in the job market for those who still think and act in the traditional old fashioned way. It will not do our students any justice to use yesterday's teaching approaches to equip them for tomorrow's challenges. Therefore, the time spent in the classroom is of high value and has to be invested in engaging students with knowledge dissemination rather than providing knowledge. Because knowledge itself became more accessible than ever, the instructor's role has shifted now from a provider of knowledge to a guide to the possibilities of knowledge application in real life-like situations.

This action research investigates the effect of changing the teaching style on students' involvement and acquisition of knowledge in literature courses. The course given here as an example is English poetry, a junior undergraduate core course in both the Departments of Applied Linguistics and the Department of English and Translation. This course in particular had a reputation amongst students of being a dull and somehow boring course that is built on memorization of some basic information about English poetry and poets in general. In accordance with the mission of the English Department which aims at: preparing the students to use the English language in all aspects of life, and to communicate with other nations, benefit from their experiences, responding positively to the world challenges and information technology without affecting their own values, ethics and professional needs in public or private sectors, as well as academically for higher studies. In addition to the program objectives that are designed to train students in the area of English literature in particular, the main objective of the course is to train and prepare students for real life situations.

METHODOLOGY:

A review of course description and material previously taught shows a traditional teaching approach that proved limited success in attracting students' attention, students' engagement and stimulating student's creativity and critical abilities. I conducted analytical revision based on 1- students' assessment and exam results, 2- observation of attendance rates, 3- reflection on students participation, 4- class observation, 5- students' feedback and exit survey, 6- peer review of course outline and material, and 7-self- assessment. I applied a diagnostic analysis and was able to identify the following areas as points that needed further enhancement and research based pedagogical intervention:

- Irregular attendance: numbers show low attendance rate and attendance irregularity which affect students' knowledge acquisition.
- Enthusiasm and involvement: there was a clear case of demotivation and lack of enthusiasm and unwillingness to participation in class discussions.
- Minimum analytical abilities: both in class discussions, quizzes and exams, the majority of the students show very limited critical abilities and their analytical approach to the material taught needed improvement.
- Dependency on memorization of knowledge.

_____

- Inability to disseminate knowledge and link it with real life
- Lack of group and team work skills
- Weakness of research skills
- Limited scale of knowledge application

I applied SWOT analysis on the situation and was able to identify the following four elements:

Strengths: advanced English language level of students, the richness of the material in poetry course, the diversity of sources available for collecting information are among the most powerful strengths I have in planning for intervention.

Weaknesses: resistance of new approaches and ideas, additional time needed for preparation the material, following up with students are among the weaknesses. The difficulty of assessment via traditional methods like exams is also considered a barrier to this approach as a specially tailored rubric has to be designed and administrated.

Opportunities: I see this approach as an opportunity to the students to discover their own creative abilities, encourage students to participate in university and national contests, open doors for community service and employability in the future.

Threats: students may show dependency on in-class activities and refrain from studying course material, over simplification and sometimes lack of cooperation may affect group work. Despite the general interest in contemporary poetry, or Arabic poetry amongst students, they were mostly unable to make the connection to most of the concepts learnt in class as they were used to traditional teaching approaches.

Based on extensive pedagogical research on teaching styles and autonomous and experimental teaching approaches, I designed an intervention plan featuring the following approaches:

- Critical thinking in literature classroom
- Enhancing autonomous learning by redesigning the course as flipped classroom
- The study diamond

The intervention is planned to meet the following challenges:

- Enhance students' engagement with education
- Develop student's abilities to critical thinking
- Open the doors for students' creativity and allow them to discover their talents.

These techniques are to be included and promoted in the course's format, I changed the course specification and outline to include the above mentioned approaches and depend mostly on creating socio constructive groups of learning. Creating groups for critical reading and presentations lends itself to Vygotsky's idea of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where emphasis lies on language and communication (Vygotsky, 1978) and (Pritchard, 2009). Critical thinking and social interaction are closely related as suggested by (Fisher, 2005) and (Beyer, 1997). Developing the communicative competence through practicing critical thinking is of more importance than acquiring the mastery of style, structure and form (Savvidou, 2004).

_____

The teaching approach and technique of the "Study Diamond" is selected among others to meet the challenges and the course is redesigned to cater this approach (Clinton, 2012)[i]. It consists of four elements:

Effect: which is the individual's first reaction or response to a phenomenon, students are asked to respond to poems and write their personal views.

Technique: relates to the specific techniques that are used in modelling the phenomenon. An analytical examination of the poems and material is required.

Context: is concerned with the why, and develop the recognition that phenomenon does not happen in the vacuum, poems are to be linked to the schools and poetic backgrounds.

Meaning: identify what the phenomenon is aiming to communicate.

This study diamond can be repeated and each student can begin from any focal point, it allows for individual differences and opens the doors for autonomous learning. Leaving it to students' personal different ways of perceptions, the study diamond seems like a suitable way to introduce students to different poetic concepts and techniques as they will be allowed to explore them on their own and link them to the different literary movements and to the social and historical milieu.

DISCUSSION:

I changed both the course design and teaching approach, as a total flipped classroom will be a huge change and it is too early for the students to be introduced to it at this stage. During the first part of the course the material was introduced through 50% lecturing and 50% students' preparation and presentations. Students were informed about the topics and the timeline at the beginning of the course and I explained thoroughly what is expected from them on each session. They were guided to the resources and the research tools to collect the material. Time was given during class and online in forums for students to share and discuss poem responses and material collected about the political/social and literary milieu of literary movements. Explaining the course design helped in raising the percentage of attendance compared to the same course taught at a previous semester. Portfolio assessment at the end of the semester, building a glossary of poetic terms and group presentations are all pedagogical techniques that were introduced in this course.

The second part of the course, as the students became more confident in their abilities to collect and present data, they were asked to form smaller groups of fours and fives and select a poetic area/topic from a list that was given to them at the beginning of the course. Each group is to prepare a research based brochure on their specific literary area and to present it creatively to their class. I gave examples of creative presentations such as acting, designing a short clip or documentary, designing a treasure hunt or other games with educational objectives and research based information. Focused group discussion was conducted with each group as students were coached to think critically and analytically (Haskins, 2006).

Though nothing is easier than preparing a lecture the same way the person is used to prepare it for a long period of time, as an educator one has to come out of the comfort zone to instill contemporary teaching techniques and approaches. When presenting the idea of the study diamond and the series of the chronological presentations, students did not show enough interest in this approach at the beginning. It was quite understandable as it was totally new to

_____

them and required additional work. Poetry is one of the subjects that students though may enjoy the poems themselves yet surely fail to link it to real life experiences or how it may affect their careers. The traditional teaching approach discredit subjects like poetry and other genres of literature from what they can offer to the learners in the twenty first century.

Dividing the students into smaller groups allowed them to; first: develop communication skills and enhance team work techniques, second: it gave them an opportunity to explore and review a large amount of material and third: it provided an opportunity to autonomous learning and creative presentations. The brochures that they were asked to distribute to their class mates after checking the correctness and accuracy of the contained information was a technique used to train students to basic research methods and referencing, it also provided them and the rest of the students with an academic foundation to their work. This was intended to couple creativity with solid academic research.

Design learning material accorded to critical thinking is a worldwide phenomenon and has been discussed extensively in education settings especially in the last two decades despite the fact that its roots is as ancient as Socrates 2500 years ago. When this approach is applied in this particular example students' abilities to 1- solve problems and connect it with real life situations, 2- develop knowledge acquisition and methods of inquiry, 3- enhance the skills to knowledge application (Fisher, 2001). The creative approaches to presentation amaze me as students were enabled to rediscover their abilities and were allowed to think outside the box and invent different settings to introduce their topics. Alice in Wonderland was one of the themes presented in the class, as the group decided to present it as an example of Victorian era, the students recreated a scene from the poem which exemplifies the era and their peers learnt in a very creative and simple way. Another creative example was also the presentation of metaphysical poetry as the group decided to act a scene about death and the dialogue between soul and body. Both formative and summative assessment was employed. A test was given to assess knowledge acquisition at the end of the lecture based part of the course. The second part required designing a Venn diagram rubric that caters the criteria assessed including both formative and summative assessments. Correctness, creativity, research and presentation skills are given weight in the evaluation.

CONCLUSION:

In order to achieve ILOs and PLO's of any education module, the method of delivery has to change tremendously from the traditional lecturing. Traditional teaching methods of literature and poetry are not adequately engaging to students, and cannot be easily linked to requirements of the job market or to solve the daily problems of the workplace. This forms a challenge to educators who are entrusted to prepare the graduates to meet career challenges. The rapid changes of the job market requirements and environment necessitates educators to provide novel learning situations. Critical thinking is the old/new approach to education, may always thought to be appropriate in teaching areas like math and science and is rarely introduced in literary subjects and humanities. Training students to think outside the box and develop analytical skills will not only keep them engaged but also provide them with a platform of mental abilities that will enable them to provide untraditional solutions to the daily problems they may face in the job environment. Promote autonomous learning is

_____

another tool that is urgently required for competitors in the job market. The suggested delivery approach of the study diamond incorporated multiple pedagogical strategies that can be mapped to different PLOs and course ILOs. In addition to autonomous learning and critical thinking, the suggested approach to teaching literature also promoted teamwork skills, advanced knowledge acquisition and developed abilities of knowledge application. As students were not familiar with the concept of flipped classroom, a gradual introduction of the concept was introduced with the objectives of; 1- familiarizing the students with the concept, 2- promoting resourcefulness and developing the ability to search and find information, 3- attempting different types of data sources,4- share and exchange of information. Students remained engaged for the whole duration of the course as they are learning from each other while preparing for their own presentations. Students also demonstrated advanced critical and analytical qualities as they incorporated knowledge they learnt from the course in extracurricular activities. Changing the method of delivery in teaching literature increases students' engagement and enhances their self-dependence and autonomous learning.

REFERENCES:

[1] Andrews, R., "Argumentative in Higher Education, Improving Practice Through Theory and Research", Routledge, New York: (2010).

[2] Baugh, T., Brickley, P. Perryman, L. Y160 Making Sense of the Arts (course), Milton Keynes: The Open University (2006).

[3] Biggs, J., Tang, C. *Teaching for Quality Learning at the University*, Open University Press, (2007).

[4] Beyer Barry K., *Improving Student Thinking, A Comprehensive Approach*, Allyn and Bacon Biott Colin and Easen Patrick (1994) *Collaborative Learning in Staffrooms and Classrooms*, David Fulton Publishers, London: (1997).

[5] Clinton, G. "Supporting the Development of Critical Thinking: Lessons for Widening Participation", *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, volume14. (2012).

[6] Fisher Robert, *Teaching Thinking: Philosophical Enquiry in the Classroom*, (2nd Edition) London: Continuum. (2003)

[7] Fisher, A., *Critical Thinking: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, UK: (2001).

[8] Pritchard Alan, *Ways of Learning, Learning Theories and Learning Styles in the Classroom*, David Fullan, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, London and New York: (2009).

[9] Ralph W. Tyler, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, The University of Chicago Press. (2013).

_____

[10] Savvidou, C., "An Integrated Approach to Teaching Literature in the EFL Classroom", *The Internet TESL Journal*, 6.12 (2004).

[11] Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, MA: (1978).

[i] The "Study Diamond" adapted from Baugh, Brickley and Perryman 2006, is based on the Making Sense of Arts module Y160, Open University, UK.