

The Secret Thoughts of Teachers

Kimberly S. Loomis, Assistant Prof. of Curriculum and Technology, Kennesaw State University

What kinds of thoughts about a lesson go through a teacher's head as he or she teaches? There is constant decision-making based on students' input. Numerous adjustments are made to the lesson with regard to pacing, questioning, and general lesson management. Do all of these thoughts need to be kept secret from the students? More and more teachers are practicing inquiry teaching in the classroom. Because these methods may be vastly different from those which students have previously experienced, teachers might have to deal with frustration – from themselves and from their students – provoked by the seemingly unstructured nature of the learning opportunity. Comments from students such as, "She's not teaching us anything," or "We're not learning anything or doing anything," are not unusual. But the teacher knows better. The teacher has inside information. The teacher watches his students practice their higher order thinking skills while they interact with the content. He knows that they are learning important skills that will benefit them in the future. But do the students know? As educators, we are aware of how important it is to "close up" a lesson, to help the students realize that they did actually learn something in class today. The "something" that students learn includes more than just content. So shouldn't they also be made aware of the thinking they had to do while they learned the content?

During an inquiry lesson, the teacher presents a discrepant event, puzzling situation, or intriguing information to the students. Then he or she asks open-ended questions to help students observe, infer, hypothesize, and draw conclusions with reference to the content. The degree to which a teacher offers guidance varies with the degree of independence on the part of the learner. Whereas it might seem that students are being left on their own to find, collect, and analyze information, the teacher is really acting as a facilitator, guiding the students as they use their thinking skills to construct their own knowledge. The role of the teacher and student are very different than those demonstrated in a traditionally oriented classroom.

As a teacher educator, I am responsible for teaching

future teachers how to teach. Others at my institution teach content to future teachers. We all must be effective models of instruction. Because of this, I use inquiry lessons as much as possible. I even use an inquiry lesson to teach students how to use inquiry methods. I pick a concept and teach it using inquiry methods and then again using traditional lecture and note taking. Then, I ask students to compare the two lessons with regard to teacher behavior, student involvement, ownership of knowledge, kinds of questions asked, and other factors. A list of student responses become a list of the characteristics of inquiry vs. traditional lesson methodologies. Upon completion of this lesson on lessons, students' eyes widen with the realization that they have used higher order thinking skills to construct concepts important to the learning. It seems that after this, they are really "turned on" to inquiry methods. The next time I begin a lesson, they are aware that the objectives for the lesson include practicing thinking skills. And, as stated before, we have that an awareness of the objectives promotes the achievement of the objectives. They participate with great enthusiasm and activity.

Soon, my students/future teachers will make their way into their own classrooms. It is hoped that they will incorporate the inquiry methods they learned of as students of teacher education. Why not share the secrets they know? I did when I was teaching them about inquiry methods. Teachers sometimes take the first few minutes of class to teach students group communication skills. Why not teach students how to participate in an inquiry lesson? Pick a concept and teach it first using inquiry methods and then using more traditional methods. Ask students to compare the two so that they become aware of the learning and thinking that is happening as each lesson progresses.

By letting students in on the secret thoughts of teachers, there is the likelihood of increasing their active participation and reducing the frustration that results from the perception of the lesson's having no structure. Sharing objectives, purposes, procedures and motivations for the use of inquiry methods should be considered by all who teach.