

## THE SIX ELEMENTS OF EXEMPLARY TEACHING IN COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY CLASSROOMS

ED THOMAS, SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT DIVISION COBB COUNTY SCHOOLS; MATH INSTRUCTOR, KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY

Like many professionals in the field of education, I have not only worked to fulfill my teaching and administrative responsibilities, but have continuously worked to evaluate, better understand, and improve my teaching methods. Through my combined experiences in the School Improvement Division of the Cobb County School District and the Mathematics Department at Kennesaw State University, I have had a unique opportunity to study and understand a variety of pedagogical theories and experience, first hand, their effects on students at the university, high school, and middle grades levels. I have continuously worked to develop, adjust, and refine, my teaching methods to optimize the learning experiences of my students. The success of my teaching methods are substantiated by the learning that takes place in my classes and the satisfaction proclaimed by my students through the end of course evaluations or customer surveys.

Through the years I have come to know that the quality of teaching is not measured by how well or how much I cover the material, or by how tough my standards are as evidenced by percentages of students who drop or fail my courses. Instead, the quality of teaching can only be measured in terms of how much my students learn, how much they understand, and how much knowledge they retain for future applications in learning and life. While many professors and teachers feel good about the formulas and theories they communicate and portray on the board, some believe that their responsibility and accountability ends there. Few educators take it upon themselves to frequently monitor their students' understanding and the effectiveness of their instruction. But frequent monitoring of student progress and adjustments in instruction are a small part of the exemplary teaching process. The purpose of this article is to clearly describe what I call the six elements of exemplary teaching, the same elements that I use in my classes. The six elements of exemplary teaching are as follows.

### The Personal Touch

Whenever possible, I try to get to know my students and show an interest in the everyday challenges they face and their experiences outside of class. The very first day of class, I challenge myself to go around the class and learn the first names of all my students. While the process takes only about fifteen minutes, the positive effects of the experience last beyond the duration of the course. Many of my students tell me that I am the only instructor that they

have had who takes time to learn their name. Once I learn my students' names, I take time to discuss the greater importance of learning over the importance of grades. I also convince my students that, with my leadership, my teaching methods, my support, and their participation, commitment, and persistence, they will be successful. Together, my students and I are a team. Together, we will succeed in the learning and teaching process.

### The Paired Learner Model

Shortly after learning the names of my students the first night of class, I assign all my students to learning pairs. The purpose of learning pairs is simple. Being in a college class, where new and challenging concepts are taught almost everyday, can be a stressful experience for students. Students can especially experience difficulty if they have to learn alone with minimal support from the teacher. So how can a caring teacher provide comforting support to thirty or more students on a regular basis? The Paired Learner Model enables teachers to design learning activities that encourage students to work in pairs so they can support each other in the learning process. I use the paired learner model during homework check, practice problems that accompany my lectures, and P3CR activities. Through the end of course evaluations, many of my students express appreciation and praise for the opportunity to learn with a partner.

### P3CR Activities

The acronym P3CR stands for Problem solving, Communication, Collaboration, Connections, and Reasoning. In addition to developing knowledge and skills, most college and university instructors want their students to learn to think critically. P3CR activities are paired learner, critical thinking activities that engage students in problem-solving, communication, collaboration, connections, and reasoning. The P3CR activities are administered in class once each week. Paired learners have approximately thirty minutes to complete the critical thinking activity. Since the activities include one or two problems, they can easily be graded the same night in class. The students record their grades on a P3CR record sheet. At the end of the course, the students average their P3CR grades and turn their activity sheets and score sheets in to me. The average P3CR grade carries the weight of one major test grade. Since the P3CR activities are grades with an

emphasis on participation, the critical thinking engagements are seen as fun, challenging, and rewarding by the students. The P3CR activities serve as an excellent means through which I can frequently monitor my students' progress and the effectiveness of my instruction. Through the end of course customer surveys, I have learned that the P3CR activities play a major role in forming positive learning attitudes on behalf of my students.

## Empowering Students Through Success

I once heard that in order for students to learn, they must experience success at least seventy percent of the time. I believe that student learning is greatly enhanced by student success. Therefore, my goal early in the course is to engage students in learning experiences that yield high returns in the form of student successes. As students begin to experience success, they also begin to build self-confidence and an interest in learning. On that foundation I begin to construct an instructional program that challenges students through rigorous concepts, challenging P3CR activities, and student achievement that breaks the boundaries of traditional expectations. In the end of course evaluations, virtually all my students express great joy in their new found confidence and understanding of learned knowledge and concepts.

## The Right Assessment Package

College and university professors use a variety of assessment packages. Some professors give grades for homework, some quiz on a regular basis, some give up to four exams during a course, and some determine students' grades using one final exam and take no other grades in the course. To qualify as an element of exemplary teaching, I believe that an assessment package must be one that keeps students in the game. In my classes, I generally give two exams during the semester (mid-course and end of course) and a cumulative final exam. Together, the course exams, final exam, and P3CR grade can generate a total of 400 points. If the final exam grade is greater than the lowest course exam grade, the final exam grade will replace that course exam grade. With this option, a student who starts slowly has hope and incentive to continue in the course. As a result of this policy, and the other elements of exemplary teaching, I have very few students (if any) who ever withdraw from my courses. I have many students who choose to remain in a course and eventually reach their learning goals.

## Instructor Accountability

My expectations for my students are anything but normal. I expect all my students to learn, understand, and retain

the information and concepts I teach. When it is time to assess the learning that has taken place, I expect my classes to post more A's -than B's, more B's than C's, and no D's or F's. More often than not, my students and I meet my expectations. On the few occasions when we don't, I communicate with my class and analyze the instruction and student participation that led to the unacceptable assessment results. Our goal is to make whatever adjustments are necessary to get back on the successful learning track.

## Summary

The learning process can be affected by many variables, many which we cannot control. The six elements of exemplary teaching are representative of high impact variables that can be controlled by the teacher and can virtually neutralize the negative variables and ensure successful learning. Teachers will deliver an instruction program that motivates students and causes quality learning, understanding, and learning retention to take place if they

- take a personal interest in their students
- encourage students to support each other in the learning process
- engage students in critical thinking through in-class activities
- empower students through success, administer an assessment process that keeps students in the game
- hold themselves accountable for student success

Upon implementing the six elements of exemplary teaching, don't be surprised if your students regard your class as one of the best they ever had. \*