A Student-directed Class for Teachers Working with Pupils with Learning Disabilities

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This paper provides a description of a methods class for teachers of students with learning disabilities in which we tried to "practice what we were preaching." We did this by involving the teachers in the process of connecting their experiences with school and learning to the course in which they were enrolled.

The content and structure of the student-directed methods course flowed from a set of core practices about learners with disabilities which includes: "Learners learn best from experiences about which they are passionately interested and involved" (Poplin, 1988, p. 405) and students learn more effectively when allowed a sense of ownership about what they learn (Adelman & Taylor, 1993; Deci & Chandler, 1986). The course emphasized that current learning is dependent on prior learning experiences, i.e, experiential learning requires that skill and process instruction be integrated with information that matches the desires, interests and experiences of the student. Instruction that incorporates such practices commonly uses thematic units or projects and provides the "...organic connection between education and personal experience." (Dewey, 1963, p.25).

Students in this experimental methods course were typically teachers who were already working in classes for pupils with learning disabilities. Each time the student-directed course was taught, the instructor started by asking the teachers to describe the primary characteristics of students with learning disabilities with whom they worked. For the five sections of the course taught over two years, data indicated that their perceptions of students with learning disabilities remained constant—low motivation, impulsive, dependent, poor self-concept, isolated, frustrated, and immature. Interestingly, these were terms which described social/emotional attributes rather than any academic or learning-related characteristic. The teachers were then asked to describe what they considered to be their own most memorable school experience. After these experiences were recorded for all to read, the students extracted those common threads which were apparent. These were also consistent for students from course to course: A memory of work that was **excellent**, typically a **hands-on, experiential** activity, often an activity which moved **out of the classroom** and for which there was opportunity to **work with others**, and for which there often was **public recognition**. These common elements of memorable experiences were always identified across the multiple sections and each quarter were recorded for future reference.

These "memorable moments" were also tied back to the learner characteristics which the teachers had just described. What impact, for example, does doing work that is seen as excellent have on aspects of appearing to be frustrated or seeming to have a low self-concept or how does working collaboratively impact being isolated? Finally, the teachers were presented with the course objectives and asked what they could do to meet the set of objectives required by the department and the state's Teacher Certification Test in Learning Disabilities, while allowing for those elements common in the memorable experiences. If the course was to be most effective, it was necessary that it reflect those elements of "memorable school moments" which they had already identified, i.e., excellence, experiential, hands-on, and collaborative, with public recognition.

Through brainstorming, negotiation and voting, a set of activities would be established for each class which would allow the teachers to demonstrate meeting each objective as well as addressing elements of memorable experiences. This was described to the teachers as the cornerstone of the course, because if the course was to be effective, it needed to include the hands-on, experiential activities that had been identified as comprising memorable school moments.

The negotiated requirements and activities selected by the teachers were amazingly consistent—whether due to subtle guidance from the instructor or from a unique homogeneity of students. For example, no group of teachers ever selected having a test as a means of documenting having mastered course objectives. Likewise, all groups chose to do a teaching project in which they would demonstrate the application of teaching principles. Although cooperative work was an option for demonstrating meeting objectives, none of the classes opted to do group projects. All opted instead for doing individual teaching projects with their students in which they would document the knowledge and skills required by the course requirements.

The major part of the class sessions during the first two weeks of our ten week quarters were spent brainstorming, discussing, voting, and ultimately deciding on how to handle various aspects of the course. Typi-

cal issues included: What should the criteria be for evaluating projects? What materials and software should be demonstrated to class members? How should we get information about effective teaching strategies? How should we organize to present information about...? Once the course was organized, class sessions were a combination of traditional instructor presentations (e.g., modeling instructional procedures and strategies, and leading discussions) and small group activities organized by teachers. Because having the instructor "tell how to do it" was one of the options for covering the course objectives, it was the option of choice for many topics—especially as the course moved toward its conclusion.

At the end of the course we always discussed the manner in which the course operated and students' reactions to it. Again their reactions were almost identical across quarters. The teachers agreed that they appreciated having input into how they were evaluated. On the other hand, they always expressed a sense of frustration about the amount of time required to make group decisions and anxiety over the lack of clearly defined expectations about requirements and activities presented by the instructor at the beginning of the course. "Just tell us what to do and we'll do it" was the complaint. Teachers noted that the course experience was "helpful" and "interesting" but that given the limited time available for the course, the process was frustrating and inefficient. "We just never got as much done as we want to do" was the observation at the end of each section of the course. In general the course was described as effective, but not always very efficient for self-motivated students.

Follow-up Evaluation

A survey was sent to those teachers who had completed the "student-directed" version of our methods course in learning disabilities in an effort to evaluate the relative impact of the course on their view of teaching. The survey was constructed with two major groups of items: items based on elements of a student-directed emphasis based on concerns about their own pupils with learning disabilities (lack of independence, impulsive, etc.) and items which reflected a teacher-directed focus based on empirically validated principles of instruction (e.g., instruction follows a specific procedure, Christenson, Ysseldyke, Thurlow, 1989).

The former students were asked to indicate the extent to which student-directed and teacher-directed approaches provided for each of the aspects of instruction listed on the survey by giving a rating of 5 through 1 (very effective to not effective). A total of 30 former teachers responded to the survey—about a 40% return rate. As might be expected, respondents rated a student-directed approach somewhat higher for items based in concerns about a student-directed emphasis (e.g., developing student independence, cooperation and motivation) and a teacher-directed emphasis rated higher for items based on research on effective instruction (e.g., providing frequent, active monitoring of students and efficient use of time to complete work). Teachers indicated their intention to use more of a student-directed approach with their own students in the future. •

References

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Highest Rated Responses

1. **How effective is student-directed instruction in promoting independence? 3.90**
2. **How effective is student-directed instruction in promoting cooperative working relationships among students? 3.86**
3. **How effective is teacher-directed instruction in providing frequent, active monitoring of student responses? 3.83**
4. **How effective is teacher-directed instruction in efficiently using the available time to complete the required work? 3.78**
5. **How effective is teacher-directed instruction in following specific instructional procedures (e.g., review of previous lesson, a demonstration-prompt-practice format, and procedure for correcting errors)? 3.78**
6. **How effective is student-directed instruction in motivating your students? 3.77**

Overall, how effective is student-directed instruction for students with learning disabilities? 3.67
Overall, how effective is teacher-directed instruction for students with learning disabilities? 3.40