

Reflections on Teaching:
Searching for Milestones of Excellence

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Abstract

A study was led which examined teaching and learning perceptions of three students and their professor upon completion of an elective course in a Canadian Bachelor of Education program. Designed as a case study, coding and thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews revealed highlights of the learning journey as described by the participants. Enthusiasm and preparedness of the professor, opportunities to take personal ownership for learning, and the importance of a positive classroom environment emerged as important to these four stakeholders. As a strategy to help others consider their own teaching environments, a number of themes were further examined in order to uncover why a course was considered memorable and engaging.

Keywords: engagement, post-secondary teaching, student perceptions of learning

Reflections on Teaching: Searching for Milestones of Excellence

What is it that captures the attention of students and empowers them to authentically engage in a post-secondary course? Such a question has remained foundational to the adult learning experience and has led to the fact that meaningful connections between teachers and students, both inside and outside of the classroom, resulted in useful, lifelong learning (Liu, 2013; Cox, McIntosh, Terenzini, Reason, & Quaye, 2010). Frequently, courses existed in educational programs which attracted students because of their desire to partner with a professor on a learning journey. Students were excited to dive into the experience as opposed to simply registering for a course to fulfill a program requirement. By examining such a phenomenon from the perspective of three students and their professor in a Bachelor of Education program at a Canadian university, this study was undertaken to further understand factors which contributed to a memorable course experience for students.

This was accomplished by attempting to discover meaning from lived experiences through personal narratives (Bruner, 2004, vanManen, 2007). Specifically, meaning was uncovered from three students and their professor as they reflected on their course experience through semi-structured interviews. This was done to gain a deeper understanding of the aspects of the course participants remembered after it had concluded. To do so, the following research question led this study:

- What experiential factors contributed to students recalling their course as important and memorable?

Conceptual Framework

As a qualitative study, focus was placed on examining experiential reflections through conversational-style interviews with three students and their professor based on their post-course

recollections. A conceptual framework was developed for this study which recognized the fact that meaning could be uncovered from the participants' personal experiences (Patton, 2002). Specifically, student engagement (Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009) and teacher/student connectivity (Clift, 2009) were considered key concepts for this study.

Employing a semi-structured interview process (Fontana & Frey, 2000), these concepts were initially thought to yield positive and memorable learning for students. The simultaneous uniqueness and interrelatedness of these concepts, (Jabareen, 2009) proved to be an appropriate platform to investigate factors both students and their professor felt were milestones of excellence during their course. These concepts led to consideration as to how themes such as engagement, ownership for learning, teacher/student connections, and instructional strategies, played a key role (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in the design of the research and interview questions for this study.

To position the conceptual framework for this investigation, case study was chosen as the method to investigate what could be learned from the four participants. This method acknowledged that each participant brought a unique perspective to the research question based on their individual workplace experiences and educational journeys (Stake, 2000). Classified as an intrinsic case study, this investigation was not intended to represent similar cases or illuminate trends (Stake, 2000) with other post-secondary courses. Specifically, this investigation was undertaken because of a research interest into why students enjoyed interacting with a particular professor.

Although generalizability of case studies has been cited as a strength in qualitative research (Denzin, 1989), this investigation was not one in which scientific generalization was emphasized (Simons, 1980). This study was an investigation of the particular (Hamilton, 1980;

Yin, 1989) and could be considered useful to further investigate memorable teaching through comparison to other situations in post-secondary education. This study also added to the body of research as to why students connected with certain teachers no matter the content being facilitated.

Literature Review

Acknowledging memorable learning experiences between adults belong to the student and teacher as a shared, social experience, (MacKeracher, 1996) learning must be considered from both curricular and social perspectives. By considering learning as personal, students have the opportunity to acknowledge their own experiences lead to new, personal learning in their own lives (McCarthy, 2006). By examining the relationships students and their professor built during their time together, along with the roles and responsibilities each brought to the learning experience, high levels of teacher-student engagement may be linked to decreased levels of student attrition (Crosling, Heagany, & Thomas, 2009).

As reported by Drea (2004), student attrition and retention was crucial to the sustainability of post-secondary educational programs. This study examined factors which participants enjoyed regarding their course experiences, learned from them, and understood how personal, new learning integrated into their lives. In doing so, a unique perspective regarding student attrition and retention in post-secondary education was offered.

This concept was supported through the fact that the experience of institutional learning has been described as a function between teachers, students, and content (Corso, Bundick, Haywood, & Quaglia, 2013). Although the significance of teacher/student engagement has been linked to quality learning experiences, it has been reported that up to 60% of American high school students remained chronically disengaged (Klem & Connell, 2004).

By design, this investigation included students with varying backgrounds and professional goals. Therefore, an opportunity was presented to consider how teaching must change to meet the evolving needs of learners (Canadian Education Association, 2013). Specifically, each participant possessed different communication styles, workplace experiences, technological skills, and employment goals. As a result, increased learning engagement was required to yield positive results for all students in their professional lives and overall well-being (Gallup, 2013). In addition, engagement in the forms of thinking, feeling, and acting have been reported as a result of students believing their teachers were available, concerned, impartial, and respectful (Wentzel, 1998). Such perspective was supported by Silverman (2007) and Chan (2003) as their research concluded that the beliefs and attitudes of teachers had a direct impact on both students and the teaching and learning dynamic.

Acknowledging the complexities of human interaction in the context of situational observation, interpretation, and dissemination of results, it was crucial to be rigorous and thorough with data collection and analysis (Patton, 1999) for this study. In order for such credibility to emerge, significant levels of reflexivity (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) and empathic neutrality (Patton, 2002), were employed by the investigator. For example, the interviews were captured in as consistent a manner as possible (Lapadat, 2000). As well, it was understood that once the data were transcribed the written text became static and lost subtle inferences such as body movement and unspoken connections between the participant and interviewer. This reality, along with how the transcriber made decisions regarding the content being captured, confirmed how crucial it was to attend closely to the entire interviewing and transcription process. These observations have been offered to create credibility within this study.

Further establishing credibility for this study, when undertaking research intended to uncover meaning through the lived experiences of others, the researcher must work to attain a level of credibility which can be accepted by the participants within the study and individuals who encounter the research in the field (Stake, 2000). By ensuring these high levels of credibility, those who engage with this study will be able to attach value and worth to the research. Individuals will then have the opportunity to accept the research as a meaningful contribution to the field of educational studies and the lives of those who are impacted by the results of the study.

Method

Aspects of conversation analysis were employed to interpret meaning from post-course transcribed interviews conducted with the three students and their professor. In doing so, emphasis was placed on ethically and confidentially securing participant-oriented data as opposed to responses from the investigator (Forrester, 2002). The transcripts were analyzed with awareness as to why certain conversational aspects followed previous statements, care for when the participant and investigator moved back and forth between conversation, and the sequential organization of the conversation (Forrester, 2002). By doing so, awareness of the relationships within the conversation between the investigator and participant were acknowledged and respected.

In total, 82 participant responses were identified during the initial coding procedure. These responses were categorized into ten thematic codes based on the meaning of the content presented. Seven codes were chosen to draw conclusions based on the clarity and volume of responses from the participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Through the reduction of the data, application of a coding procedure, and interpretation of the emergent themes meaning was

created from the conversations held with each participant within the study. Additionally, commonalities or patterns between codes were observed (Thomas, 2006). This was an important activity because numerous comments made by participants were related to more than one code.

Instrument Design

As a part of the ethics approval process, an interview was created which employed ten open-ended, conversational type questions. As shown in Appendix A, the interview questions for the students were slightly different than those for the professor. This was because the interview experience attempted to uncover specifics of course delivery from the perspective of the professor and experiential moments experienced by the students. The interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed upon time and location between the investigator and participant. It was anticipated that the interview session would take no more than one hour. Interestingly, the interviews ranged between thirty and ninety minutes in duration.

Participant Demographics

Three Bachelor of Education students who enrolled in the course volunteered to participate in this study. These individuals were purposively chosen (Given, 2008) as each brought a unique perspective as a learner to the course. The first student was working towards a career in the primary or secondary teaching environment. For this student, the course was an elective within their program. The other two students were enrolled in a Bachelor of Education program with a specialization in Human Resource Development. This program was designed to provide individuals with opportunities to teach adults in either community colleges or facilitate learning in various business environments. Of these two students, one was teaching within a community college and the other was working as an educational administrator. The professor,

with 39 years of university-level teaching experience, had facilitated the course numerous times and possessed a well-developed, professional connection to the subject matter.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview process was employed with the four participants within this investigation. Each interview was digitally audio-recorded and then transcribed using word processing software. As a member check to ensure accuracy of the transcribed interviews, each electronic transcript was reviewed by the corresponding participant (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004). At this time, participants were provided with the opportunity to make changes they saw fit to the interview. Once final approvals regarding accuracy of the transcripts were received by the investigator, they were analyzed for themes and patterns using qualitative coding software. The final paper was distributed to each participant for comment as a second member check. Commentary aimed at ensuring accuracy and credibility was welcomed.

Findings

Through the coding process, participant responses were categorized into ten thematic categories. Seven themes, including Strengths of the Professor, Teaching Strategies, The Teaching Environment, Personal Ownership for Learning, Memorable Moments, Connecting with the Professor, and Engagement were then chosen for further examination. This was because these themes included enough volume and response clarity to support further analysis. These themes included perspectives from both the students and the professor which added to the richness of the findings. Interestingly, students' comments frequently matched those of the professor in regards to course planning and the overall vision for the learning experience.

*Table 1**Transcript Response Coding*

Participant Response Theme	Number of Responses
Strengths of the Professor	19
Teaching Strategies Used by the Professor	13
The Teaching Environment Created by the Professor	11
Personal Ownership for Learning	10
Memorable Moments	9
Connections with the Professor	6
Why Did You Take This Course	5
Engagement	4
Learning Cycles	4
Support for the Learning Journey by the Professor	1
Total Volume of Codes	82

Strengths of the Professor

Participants identified a number of strengths for their professor. These included enthusiasm, being prepared for each class, the ability to make a personal connection, frequent communications, a welcoming demeanour, genuine interest in every student, and a commitment to the entire course experience. Comments from the various participants included:

“You know he knows the content, but more importantly he is so enthusiastic about it that he helps with selling you on what he is teaching.”

“He made us all feel like we are an important part of the classroom no matter which background that we came from.”

“He’s got a dynamic personality that just has you kind of on the edge of your seat waiting what he is going to say.”

“I’m passionate about what I teach. It’s more than just covering content; it’s a real deep passion about it.”

“His teaching style would be something that you would really want to model; he’s really somebody to aspire to because that is how approachable you want to be with your students, right?”

As the most common theme which emerged through the analysis of the transcripts, it became clear that a connection between participants was happening at a deeper level than content expertise (McCarthy, 2012). This was an important finding because these strengths set the stage for a memorable learning experience.

Teaching Strategies

Participants were able to recall a variety of specific teaching strategies employed by the professor during the course. These included frequent, smaller group work assignments, ensuring the first session was welcoming, embedding the assignments into real-world scenarios, high levels of physical movement, varying the seating positions for each class, frequent, yet manageable, levels of homework, negotiating to customize assignments, and sharing personal stories.

“Then, of course, he makes all these assignments so real, right.”

“The other thing he really uses a lot of is groups. Groups, groups, groups, groups. Never the same groups; we’re always in different groups.”

“I think the content leaps from being text-book content to become real, real content. I’ve always believed in the power of the personal story.”

The Teaching Environment

The teaching environment emerged as an important theme for both the students and the professor. A casual and relaxed atmosphere balanced with the opportunities for all participants to take risks was created. One participant commented that the pace of the course was too fast

by times. This was an interesting observation because the professor described high levels of activity were integrated into the course so that students would not feel bored. Ultimately, a safe environment, facilitated through trust and openness, was developed for the participants.

“Oh, the overall teaching environment is very relaxed, very casual. All the same, it was very professional.”

“We were just so engaged and engrossed in the presentation, the conversations, and I just think that time went by very quickly in that sense, for sure.”

“I would say it was dynamic, fast moving, always interesting. There’s a lot of variety--the uses videos and movement, as I said. So, the environment is very positive and fast-paced.”

Personal Ownership for Learning

An attempt was made to uncover how participants customized their course experience to suit their professional workplace and teaching needs. During the interviews, the concept of personal ownership was difficult to communicate and interpret. This was due to low levels of understanding of this concept in regards to the teaching and learning dynamic. This finding presented an opportunity for further investigation and research.

“Maybe I’m just too cynical, but a lot what we’re doing with, you know, kind of dancing and moving to music and doing multiplication tables and finger painting. I realize there is value in there, but for what I do day to day there isn’t really much value. So that in itself was disappointing, and there wasn’t a lot of ownership because I didn’t see why I needed to own that information for what I do.”

“It’s unfortunate because it seems, at least for me, that kind of the overall concept of enterprise education got lost in doing tasks which I had a hard time kind of tying into enterprise education.”

“I would say right from the outset, like my first project that I completed was my interview with my paper presentation. I chose the interview challenge, and I think that was when I took that on I really felt that I belonged in the program. I really felt that I belonged to this specific course.”

“But in the enterprise course the obvious ownership happens in pretty well every one of those challenges.”

Connecting with the Professor

All participants were clear in their communications that the personal and professional connection to their instructor was a powerful and motivating force. Participants indicated this made a difference in their overall experience.

“You know, but he’s been doing this for so long, and we’ve taught classes where you had people that just waste your time, so that doesn’t happen in this classes. Nobody wastes your time in his class, right.”

“(The professor) is interesting because of the way I feel that I really connect with him, but I also experience him as being in a hurry. Like he always needs to move on, you know. It is just different than feeling like somebody will stay in the conversation until you’re done. But, I still really feel a connection with him, so...”

Engagement

Although there were limited responses to the concept of teacher and learner engagement, it was included as one of the seven themes within this investigation. This was because, even though student demographics are changing in Canada, (Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 2007) engagement remains a crucial aspect of adult learning (Barkley, 2010). In the case of this study, the professor understood physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement ensured students remained connected to their course. Participants seemed to understand that when they were engaged they were creating an opportunity to learn for themselves.

“I don’t think I have ever been as engaged in a course, even if I didn’t see a lot of validity in what I was doing.”

“The other big thing is that there’s high retention if there’s engagement emotionally. I believe that strongly.”

Implications of the Findings

The findings from this study aligned with research which investigated how teachers who were present for their students led to decreased student attrition (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009). The thematic analysis of the responses provided by those involved in this study confirmed that multiple aspects of the course, ranging from the initial ways the teacher connected socially with the students to ensuring the physical layout of the learning space was engaging, made a difference to the overall course experience for both students and their professor. These findings should be taken seriously by professors and administrators as they consider excellence in post-secondary education.

Recognizing the range of responses from the participants within this study, an opportunity has been presented for faculty to consider merits of cyclical learning models (Kolb,

1984; Abrahams & Singh, 2010; Bell & Odom, 2012; McCarthy, 2012). In doing so, faculty can apply strategies to better connect with students, communicate content, and support new learning as it occurs for the individual. This approach would then allow students to take personal ownership for their learning, thus resulting in higher levels of engagement and overall course satisfaction.

Employing a case study approach, this investigation qualitatively examined experiential factors as to why students recalled their course as memorable and how the professor designed a socially engaging experience. This was an important study because as the post-secondary student demographic shifts to accommodate increased numbers of international learners and career changers (Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 2007), faculty must ensure all students have the opportunity to remain engaged in their studies and learn in ways which are meaningful in their own lives. Although the participant population in this study included only three university students and their professor, each provided important perspective as to why they felt their course experience was positive. This study uncovered the significance of enthusiasm, preparedness, sharing personal experiences, changing the layout of a classroom, ensuring assignments had real-world applicability, and striking a balance between text book learning and real-world applicability.

Opportunity for Further Research

This was an important study because it has added to the body of research seeking to understand why students reported positive learning experiences after completing a course. Although designed as a case study representative of a particular university course, this investigation demonstrated that data could be qualitatively gathered and then credibly used to help others understand or re-affirm what is or is not working in their educational courses or

programs. Furthermore, this study can be used to inform faculty development sessions aimed at supporting the needs of post-secondary students.

Educators may wish to use the results of this case study to reflect upon their own course planning and delivery strategies. By doing so, post-secondary faculty can consider themes such as acknowledging various backgrounds of students and the importance of their professional and personal communication practices. This study has illuminated that post-secondary faculty and administrators must continue to collaboratively explore student engagement.

Teachers are passionate about sharing their knowledge and expertise but may benefit from exploring how they can hone their communication practices so that student interaction is maximized during a course. By looking forward and considering that teaching can no longer continue in the same manner as in the past, the opportunity exists to build new ways for educators and school communities to interact. In doing so, educators have the opportunity to work towards addressing a perceived misalignment between 21st century learning (O'Banion, 1997) and 20th century teaching strategies focussed on discipline-based, grade-defined learning expectations (Canadian Education Association, 2013).

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*Appendix A**Interview Questions*

Student Questions

1. Why did you register for (*course title removed for anonymity*)?
2. Can you describe any differences between what you were expecting from the course and what actually took place during the first session of the course?
3. Can you describe any particular teaching strategies used by the professor which stood out for you?
4. Were there any times you felt the professor was not connecting with you as a learner? If so, when did this happen? If not, why do you think this was the case?
5. Can you describe the most important learning you are taking away from (*course title removed for anonymity*)?
6. How would you describe the overall teaching environment created by the professor?
7. Can you describe the level of personal ownership you felt regarding content of the course?
8. How did the professor support your personal learning journey in (*course title removed for anonymity*)?
9. What would you describe as facilitation strengths of your professor?
10. Did you experience a class where the three hours of scheduled time passed quickly? If so, why do you think this happened?

Professor Questions

1. Why did you introduce the course as “not a course on what to teach but instead a course of how to teach.”?
2. How do you integrate Bernice McCarthy’s learning cycle into your course design?
3. Can you describe any particular teaching strategies you employed during the course which you felt were particularly engaging for the class?
4. Were there times you felt you were not connecting with the class? If so, what did you do about this?
5. During this course, did you make conscious decisions to move back and forth between right and left brain learning modes?
6. Can you describe the teaching and learning environment you attempted to create for (*course title removed for anonymity*)?
7. Are there any steps you take to ensure learners take personal ownership of course content?
8. What would you describe as strengths of your facilitation style?
9. I observed that each learner in the course remained quite attentive to you as their professor. Why do you feel this happened?
10. Do you feel learners will remember content within (*course title removed for anonymity*)? Why/Why not?