Increasing Awareness and Introspection in Student-Centered Learning

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In this article, we share some of our observations on how increasing student awareness of the underlying principles of student-centered learning helps learners gain insights into the underpinnings of progressive education and, thereby, into the educational goals of Miyazaki International College (MIC). The process of awareness-raising and introspection allows students to better understand and respond to the educational choices of materials, activities, and methods that teachers make on a daily basis. We provide a general description of our team-taught class and then examine several pivotal activities that were designed to increase awareness and encourage learner introspection. Finally, we show how the students' engagement in this process helps them understand the educational goals and philosophy espoused at MIC.

Overview of the Issues in Education Class

The Issues in Education course gives students an opportunity to reflect on their earlier experiences in the Japanese educational system and helps them become aware of their own teaching and learning preferences. The course also provides students with a general historical overview of western education and requires them to do basic research on an educational issue of their choice.

The team-teaching approach used in the course is grounded in the progressive educational principles of active, student-centered learning. Our class is highly participatory and often disorienting to students who expect the teachers to be at the center of the classroom process. We encourage critical thinking throughout the course and strive to help our students develop an international perspective as outlined in the *MIC Bulletin* (2001, p. 5). In the course, we stress the importance of learner awareness of the choices that teachers make regarding materials, activities, and methods. Also, we help the students develop an ability to reflect on the educational values inherent in teacher choices and, by extension, in their own learning choices.

In the first module of the course, students reflect on their previous learning experiences by drawing images of their school memories. Discussion and analysis of these memories coupled with student ideas about the ideal school environment for learning leads to an initial articulation of each student's individual educational values. Students also complete a 44-question educational values questionnaire developed by the instructors to help them recognize their personal values within "traditional" or "progressive" beliefs about education.

We have chosen to use the terms "traditional" and "progressive" as used by Doll (1996) and Ornstein and Levine (1985). A traditional class is typically teacher-centered and self-contained. It is the teacher's task to fill the learners' heads with the knowledge they require. Textbooks are commonly used and basic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic are stressed. Hard work and discipline are viewed

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as the keys to educational success in this approach. In contrast, the learner is typically in the center of the educational process in a progressive class. The teacher, serving as a resource or guide, supports the learners' educational needs. Students are active in the learning process and are encouraged to go beyond the walls of the classroom to gain knowledge. In a progressive approach to education, individual learner needs and interests play a more important role in the development of curriculum than do the basic skills.

In our students' first peer teaching assignment, they apply their understanding of either traditional or progressive learning by teaching others in the class how to make or do something simple such as making a paper bird or doing the first set of moves to execute a karate kick. After an analysis of the micro-teaching, students complete the educational values questionnaire a second time. The class then examines the group responses to the questionnaire and makes generalizations about the educational values of the class as a whole. The module is brought to a close through a student paper in which all of the activities are summarized and analyzed.

The second course module focuses on the history of western education. Through individual and group activities, students teach each other the content of a general reading on the history of education. They are asked to apply the principles of progressive education which they studied in the first module as they develop their learning activities for the history of education content in the second module. As a culminating activity, the students jointly develop a time-line for the history of western education with dates, places, and content for each period.

The third and final module is designed to integrate all of the learning in the course. Students use the knowledge of their own educational values and their basic understanding of the history of education to help them identify, research, present, and lead discussion on an educational issue of their choice. The issue can be in the Japanese educational context or in a different national or cultural context. We expect the students to choose an issue in which they are deeply interested. They learn basic research skills as they gather the information and then use their background on the history of education coupled with their awareness of student-centered education to design learning activities for the class.

Activities Designed to Encourage Introspection

In this section, we discuss the course activities specifically designed to encourage student introspection. The overall goal of the first module, "Thinking about your own Educational Values and Experiences," is to help students express their own personal learning and teaching philosophy. We ask the students to describe their own educational experiences by drawing and discussing what they consider to be a typical classroom. Next they study, complete, and analyze their responses to the Educational Values Questionnaire. Additionally, they read about and discuss the key components that distinguish the two educational philosophies (traditional and progressive) from each other. Through this work, they are able to place their own educational experiences on a continuum with a traditional educational philosophy at one end and a progressive educational philosophy at the other end.

The culminating activity is a paired teaching demonstration, which is video-taped, in which two students teach their classmates how to do or make something. However, we require one partner to use a progressive approach while the other uses a traditional one. Preparatory activities include developing a lesson plan in which the students state their teaching objectives and describe how they intend to achieve them. They develop the materials required for the demonstration and then determine how they, as teachers, will know if the students have actually met the teaching objectives.

Since this activity supports the overall goal of helping students clarify their own personal philosophies of education, the most important element of the activity is the reflective feedback portion. In other words, the process, not the product, is of higher importance. In the reflective feedback process, students view each taped demonstration and individually complete a series of questions (see Table 1) which asks them to go beyond the content demonstrated in order to examine how they, as students, responded to the content, method, and teacher in that particular educational experience.

Table 1
Feedback Questions

Watch the video of the teaching demonstrations. Complete a worksheet for each lesson.
1. What was the lesson about?
2. What educational philosophy did the teacher follow? How did you know?
3. What did the teacher do? What did the students do?
4. What do you think were the teacher's objective(s)?
5. Did the teacher meet the objective(s)? How do you know?
6. As a student, did you feel that you learned the material?
7. Overall, how did you feel as a student in this lesson?

For their own demonstrations, they answer a different set of questions, as shown in Table 2, that are designed to focus attention on the inherent differences between the two philosophies and on how they, as teachers, responded to the content, method, and students in their teaching.

To provide closure to the module, the students write a short guided paper. This paper gives them a second opportunity to articulate their personal educational philosophies, especially in light of possible changes that may have occurred in their own beliefs. They describe and reflect on their work in the module, elaborate on what they have learned about themselves as students and as teachers, and define the educational model they would like their own children to experience.

Through their writing, many of the students show that they have made significant progress in understanding the rationale underlying the progressive educational approach. Shifts in their values, ideas, and opinions about how education can be defined is evident in the differences in the two sets of questionnaires (one at the beginning of the module; the other toward the end) and in the descriptions of types of education they would prefer for their own children. While the students maintain that a traditional approach to education is

important, they also see a place for a progressive approach. The majority justify the use of a traditional approach for content that they feel must be mastered in early primary school education. Once children have gained a basic educational foundation, the students believe that the children may benefit from an educational setting in which a progressive philosophy guides the teaching and learning. This belief interestingly parallels their own educational experiences: a traditional elementary and secondary learning system followed by the student-centered higher education learning environment at MIC.

Table 2
Self Reflection Questions

Review your own teaching demonstration on the video and answer these questions. Take time to reflect on your teaching and try to formulate clear responses to the questions. The answers are not for Bill and Katharine; they are to help you learn from your experiences.
1. How did you prepare for your teaching demonstration?
2. Was the lesson plan important? Why?
3. What educational philosophy did you use in teaching your lesson?
4. Do you think you successfully taught your lesson using this philosophy?
5. If you could do your teaching demonstration again, would you make any changes? What would they be?
6. If you were a teacher, which philosophy would you use to guide your teaching? Why? What are the advantages or disadvantages to using this philosophy?

In the second module of the course, "Learning about the History of Western Education," the students put the two philosophies of education into an historical context. The bulk of the information for this module comes from a five-page reading adapted from the *Children's Britannica* (1989). In order to reinforce and recycle the knowledge and information gained from the first module, each student is required to teach one section of the reading using a learner-centered activity.

We ask the students to recall learner-centered activities from their other courses at MIC. At first, many students have difficulty recalling such activities from their classes. We then focus their attention on the elements of student-centered learning by demonstrating several activities. Through this process, the students begin to become aware of the choices that their teachers at MIC make concerning learner-centered activities. The students are then able to generate a list of activity types that could be adapted to encourage students to be active and involved in learning content.

As the students reflect on possible activities for their teaching, they typically become aware of the choices that teachers must make about teaching materials, learning activities, and methods. Some students adapt specific activities that they have seen their teachers at MIC use, while others develop their own based on the progressive educational principles they have learned. However, there remain a few students who find it difficult to go outside of their previous experiences in the Japanese educational system. They struggle to

develop learner-centered activities that are based on progressive learning principles. Occasionally, even with intensive one-on-one discussions, the student-developed activities lack a learner focus, and the student teacher directly controls the classroom learning process as in a traditional approach.

Eventually, most of the students are able to demonstrate a clear understanding of the basic principles of progressive education through their teaching. Although they labor to find activities that support a learner-centered class, they have a good grasp of what such a class should be like and they begin to see the correlation between teacher choice and student learning. Furthermore, they are able to predict the possible results their own choices might have in their teaching.

To ensure student accountability for the content of the entire reading, not just the students' individual portions, the module concludes with a short answer essay exam. The test is comprised of two questions from each portion of the reading which are contributed by the student that taught that particular section. We ask the students to develop questions that are based on the content of the text, but that cannot be answered directly from the text. In this way, students continue to work and think critically about the text.

The final task in the third module, "Studying Critical Issues in Education Today," is for the students to research and teach the others about an educational issue they are interested in. By this time the students have developed a good understanding of the kinds of choices in teaching and learning educators can make based on their own educational values. They have also gained a basic knowledge of how education has changed over time. These tools help them approach their issues in a more critical manner and also increase the possibility that the other students will profit from their research on the issue.

The basic requirement for the final assignment is that the student teacher involve the class in a discussion of an educational issue. To help achieve this, we demonstrate a variety of learner-centered activities designed to encourage group discussion and focus the students' attention on the elements that may lead to an effective discussion. The students are expected to provide the class with information on their educational issue through a learner-centered activity and then to effectively engage the class in discussion. The students who are not presenting at a given time keep a learning journal (see Table 3) in which they reflect on ideas, materials, activities, and methods used in each of the presentations.

Table 3
Learning Journal Prompts

Guidelines for writing the learning journal. You will complete a journal entry after each issue is taught and discussed. Take the time to reflect on the issue and the teaching. Describing what you learned and observed is an important component of learning.

What content did you learn from the presentation?

Which activity did you think worked the best? Why?

What suggestions for improvement can you make?

By the end of the third module, the students have developed a good understanding of the components of a learner-centered class. This understanding can be seen in their own planning, in their classroom interaction, and in the reflective comments they make in their learning journals. Of course, some of the students show a greater awareness of these elements than others, but most students complete the course with a clear grasp of the differences between traditional and progressive approaches to education. They also gain an increased awareness of their roles as students in the MIC classroom.

Student Perspectives on the Course

In an effort to determine if the students had indeed understood our goals in the course and if they had become more aware of the choices that teachers make in both traditional and progressive classrooms, we asked volunteers to meet with us after class for a feedback discussion concerning the course. Over half of the students joined the discussion group and responded to specific questions (see Appendix for a list of the discussion questions). We report on their responses to three of those discussion questions here.*

Question: Why do you think we spent so much time in class discussing the difference between the traditional and progressive philosophies of education?

- *This question is also my question. Sometimes I think why in this class teacher focus on this topic: traditional philosophy and progressive philosophy. But when I do teaching plan, I can understand. People say almost all of class in MIC is progressive, progressive demonstration... But, yes, it is their progressive too, but I think especially this teaching plan class is progressive demonstration. It's the first class like this and really impressive activity teaching plan. And I could feel the teachers' prepared for class and so I can know progressive philosophy is really important. It make analyze to students. However, in Japanese and other countries, traditional philosophy is more than progressive philosophies, so teachers taught us importance of progressive philosophy.*
- *...But in this college we were receive different type of educational style, but I wasn't aware of what was difference before now. So... I can see it now. I knew. I have new idea. I can have new idea about education.*
- *Before I study in this class I thought only progressive education is the best way to do education, but traditional philosophy also has good point. And I became thinking about two philosophies.*
- *MIC say to all Japanese high school students, in MIC we learn by progressive philosophy. However, I think other class is not. It looks progressive philosophy, but now I don't think so because just presentation, just group activity, it's not progressive. Sometimes during group activity, the content is ordered by teachers and some teachers really think and really did prepare so we can understand what is the purpose of the activity, but sometimes I feel it's nonsense activity.*
- *Before to learn what is traditional or progressive education in this class, I... in other class, I, in the presentation, I was just reading or... It was not so interesting.*

I learned all of those things about traditional or progressive in this class. It influence my, the way of presentation, and which is more attractive.

The student responses to this question indicate that they gained a deeper understanding of what the differences between traditional and progressive approaches to education are and that they have been able to apply this knowledge to their experiences in other classes at MIC. They also seem to have acquired an appreciation of the good points of both approaches.

Question: Why do you think we had you, the students, take so much teaching responsibility in the class?

- *To know teachers' feeling. At first, I think teacher doesn't prepare well the class because...When I first grade [at MIC], I feel teacher is only talking, only activity so I think it's a so comfortable job...easy for the teachers. Now we are presenting about something. It is so hard!*
- *Because other class, we can't experience become teacher of progressive class. It was so very fresh and impressive.*
- *We made the class.*
- *I love English and I want to teach English to people who don't know English, but if I become a teacher, I have to teach in traditional philosophy so I don't want to do that.*
- *We did three times teaching, but everyone changed and developed the way, I think. First everyone during teaching confused, but the last presentations like a teacher!*

It is apparent from the students' responses to this question that they began to see the classroom from a teacher's perspective. That is, in the role of teacher, they gained the ability to separate themselves as students from the learning process. Perhaps the most important point they made in the responses to this question was that they felt a sense of control over their own education-- "we made the class."

Question: We used video feedback and learning journals as tools to reflect or look back on the teaching activities. Were these useful to you? If so, how? Was it beneficial for you to think about your teaching after it was over. If so, how?

- *To know what is good or bad is necessary for us, development ...*
- *If we don't look back, we forget soon. But if we review, look back, we can think again and we can discover faults, bad points, and we can develop.*
- *When the class finish, I feel full; however, I lost the purpose. And I think again, then today what did I learn? I think this is important. Looking back by writing paper or watching video is important because if, for example, the student presentation is good, but if I don't look back, my something stops here. If I look back, I can step...progress.*

It is clear from these responses that the students had become aware of the importance of development over time. They focused on the teaching tasks at hand, but saw the relevance of stepping back from the actual teaching to see what they liked and what they would want to change. Without reflection, the educational power of the experience is limited and perhaps forgotten.

Concluding Remarks

We have written about student awareness of teaching and learning choices and the role of introspection because both are directly related to how MIC students are able to make sense of what happens in our classrooms. In order for students to participate successfully in a learner-centered classroom, we feel that they must understand the philosophy of learning articulated in our educational goals. This is especially true for those students who have not experienced learner-centered classrooms in their previous educational experience. Our students typically have neither the background knowledge nor learner strategies to successfully engage in the kind of learning we offer at MIC. Therefore, we have come to believe that students need a strong grounding in the philosophical underpinnings of a learner-centered approach before they can be expected to participate cognitively and actively in their MIC courses.

Articulating their own educational beliefs through words and drawings, practicing differing approaches to learning through peer teaching, and combining learning about content and learning about method throughout the course provide a viable means for our students to negotiate the complex learning challenge they have undertaken at MIC. We are convinced that as students become increasingly more aware of the philosophical basis of their learning, both they and their teachers will enjoy a more effective and productive educational experience at MIC.

Notes

* This feedback session was taped and later transcribed. The following responses, used with permission from the students, are not edited and are taken directly from the transcript.

References

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Feedback Session Questions

- Why do you think we spent so much time in class discussing the difference between the traditional philosophy and the progressive philosophy?
- Why do you think we had you, the students, take so much teaching responsibility in the class?
- What does it mean to you when teachers say they make choices about how to teach their classes? What kinds of choices did you make?
- We used video feedback and learning journals as tools to reflect or look back on the teaching activities. Were these useful to you? If so, how? Was it beneficial for you to think about your teaching after it was over? If so, how?
- What is the MIC way? Is there a connection between the MIC way and the work we did in our class?
- Do you think that the process we used in this class will help you in your future academic career?