Are University Lecturers Communicating to Learners as Individuals in Learner - Centered Classes?

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Abstract

Teachers talk and students, as a group, listen. While educators have generally moved en masse away from such an understanding of good educational practice, classrooms often return to this format. However, current knowledge of the individual nature of the learning experience illustrates how learners in groups have different needs, are at different stages in their development (epistemologically, in terms of content specific knowledge, and learning skill development), and respond differently to the same stimuli. A case study of an in-service training exercise conducted with university language educators (N=40) is provided. It was designed to increase awareness of and reflection on teacher interactions with individual learners in classroom contexts. It illustrates how, when reflecting on interactions with students, the majority of teacher participants found a gap between their goals for and knowledge of individual students, and the messages actually communicated through their interactions with students. This paper also provides a model of teacher/student interaction, showing how the dialogue between the two parties can be at the centre of a positive learning experience, when the interactions between teachers and learners are individually appropriate and proximal. Waiting, watching, listening and engaging in dialogue are key educator practices for improved individualized classroom communications.

Key Words: dialogue, individual learning, learning, teacher-student interaction, teacher training

Introduction

Each year, each semester or quarter, teachers look out and see new groups of faces looking back. Each of these individuals bring with them varied experiences, levels of existing knowledge, and understandings of the learning process. The number of variables involved in the development of the (often) young students sitting in any classroom, and the various complex pathways in with these variables can combine, makes it pedagogically questionable to interact with these groups in a 'one size fits all' manner, and expected identical learning outcomes. More than teachers may plan or hope for, students often spend time sitting passively (Strauss, 2014). While teachers, from a logistical perspective, need to focus on their classes as groups, from a pedagogic position, they also need to focus on the many individuals that inhabit these groups. They also need to focus not only on their subject content instruction, but how each individual is experiencing this instruction and going about learning this content. This is not only a developmental concern but also a motivational one. As Armstrong and Hope (2016) note,

"Research informs that teachers are not only instructors but also motivators (Matterson, Swarthout & Zientek, 2011; Murphy & Rodriquez-Manzanares, 2009; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Hegarty, 2011; Shore, 2001) and those who communicate a genuine concern for student success motivate learners to work harder while acquiring a sense of pride for their accomplishments (Smith, Carmack & Titsworth, 2006)" (p. 24).

Learner-centred education is not a new idea, but one with a long history from "the time of Socrates (Ellerman, 2004) through to the early twentieth century work of Dewey (1916) on experiential learning, and the more recent work of Piaget (1972) on emancipatory learning" (Carson, 2012, p. 19).

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It is difficult to have to have a discussion today about good educational practice without mention of the term learner-centred. But what of classroom reality – are teachers placing the learners or the curriculum in the centre?

2. Examining practice

This section presents an example of an in-service teacher training exercise designed to

- increase teacher awareness of the importance of seeing their students as individuals
- illustrate how educators may not always be doing so, or not doing so to the degree that they could
- Highlight how waiting, watching, listening and engaging in dialogue may improve the effectiveness of their interactions with students.

2.1 Case study: University language lecturers reflecting on individual encounters

In this case study, the exercise was provided as part of a two-day in-service training session for English language lecturers at a Japanese university. The overall goal of the programme was to engage the lecturers in open discussion and awareness raising activities of their classroom practice. The author of this paper was asked to participate by facilitating a session designed to encourage understanding of the individual learning experiences of students in such language lecture environments. All the lecturers in question generally taught language classes with a student number of between 20-30. All of the 40 participants taught in a coordinated second language programme – "a program where teachers teach from common syllabi using the same, or similar, lesson plans, materials, and assessment instruments to reach shared goals and objectives. Coordinated programs typically exhibit these features: departmental support, streamed students, horizontally and vertically integrated curriculum and collaboration among all teachers for ongoing curriculum revision and innovation" (Evans, Fenning & Heigham, 2006, p. 51). While such a teaching programme has many benefits as indicated, it can be also viewed as disenfranchising and demotivating by some educators, who feel a lack of both control and input into their own practice. As a coordinated education programme does not by definition disregard or not have room for teacher input and individual teacher control of aspects of the learning process, it may be of even greater value in such coordinated contexts to raise teacher awareness of the powerful personal role they can play in individual student learning.

2.2 Methodology: Exercise Design

The exercise outlined in this section is a versatile tool in that it works as both a reflective teacher training exercise designed to improve individual and institutional practice, while also providing the researcher with data about that practice. It could be used for both purposes across a variety of institutional levels, and is not domain specific to any academic area of learning. The exercise designed for this programme and discussed in this paper requires teachers to reflect on their interactions with specific students they currently teach (or have recently taught). The courses reflected on in this discussion were all designed to be learner-centred.

Before beginning the task, the teacher participants were given a pre-learning task designed to activate their understanding of the student position (in the teacher / student relationships). As the goal in any classroom is student learning, returning to the position of a student (and to a different position in a hierarchical learning context) in order to look at aspects of the teaching and learning process is highly valuable for informing teaching practice. The primer activity is designed to highlight the difference between the level of importance students may attribute to teacher talk delivered to the class, and teacher talk delivered directly to an individual about their specific learning situation. Teacher participants are asked to undertake this activity individually.

Table 1: Pre-learning task/primer

1. Imagine a work colleague who has/had authority over you and whose position, opinion, and level of knowledge and experience you respect.
2. Think of the most recent situation when this superior addressed you as part of a larger group
3. Think of the most recent one-to-one work related interaction you had with this superior
4. Now compare the two interactions. If we equalise the inherent importance of the content, which of the two interactions were more meaningful, impactful and memorable for you?

After making some notes about their answers to these questions, participants are given some time to exchange their thoughts. As "teachers own learning experiences directly affect their beliefs and practices in their future teaching" (Nolan, 2000, p. 113), placing educators back in a recent learning situation, and a situation with a hierarchical power dynamic, has great value in allowing them to draw parallels with their learners' realities. Starting reflection from such an emic position brings educators closer to their subject – their learners. In the next stage of the exercise, the focus is on teacher interactions with students. The teachers are asked to begin reflecting on their own recent interactions with students.

Table 2: Your interactions with your students

> The following task will take about 90 minutes. The first half is a reflective individual exercise. Please feel free to go and sit quietly and comfortably wherever you choose for this portion of the task. After 45 minutes, please return to the main room, as you will complete the second half of the task in a small group with some other participants.
>
> 1. Think of 2 classes that you currently teach. From, each class, think of 3 students, specifically 3 students who you would categorise as high achieving, mid-level achieving, and lower achieving.
> 2. Write the student names along with your descriptions of what you know and feel about the students, and what you feel you need to assist them with (you can spend about 25 minutes on this section).
> **3.** On a separate sheet, write the names of the 6 students. Write down all the interactions you can recall that you recently had with each student. You may wish to write what the purpose of the interactions was, if they were positive or negative, when they occurred, and anything else you feel was relevant.
> **4.** Did your actual interactions with these students match with what you know about the students? Did your interactions assist students in the most appropriate and proximal manner? Why? Why not? Would you describe your interactions as dialogues? Write your thoughts.

3. Findings

Data from the individual participant written responses, along with the subsequent group discussions and post-activity questionnaire responses were thematically coded, revealing four themes that indicate issues with how educators communicate to learners.

3.1 Mismatch between actual interactions and the message the reflective educator would like to give.

While there are several specific findings in this study, there is one outstanding and important central finding. 82.5% of participants discovered that their interactions with students on an individual level did not always match their goals for the individual students. In fact, 72.5% of respondents said that their interactions with individual students were 'sometimes at odds' with their goals for the individuals. A large majority of interactions were coded as as 'reacting immediately to a specific issue', rather than based on longer observations of the learners, or previous dialogues. Although some consideration was given to when to interact with certain learners (e.g. interacting with quieter learners when classmates were engaged in small group or individual work), other timing issues were not often considered (e.g. waiting a few more classes to see if a learner could produce better work before intervening, when the cause of the quality of work is unknown). For most of the participants in this case study, this gap between what they could have communicated and what they did communicate seemed to be both surprising and somewhat of a 'light bulb' moment, which is well encapsulated by the following participant quotation during a group discussion.

"One of my current students has so much potential, but is really unfocused and disorganized. I want to let him know how much potential he has, and to suggest some small behavioral changes he can choose to make that could dramatically improve his performance and make his learning more successful and probably enjoyable for him. But looking back on the semester so far, I have just realized that I can only remember two occasions that I spoke to him as an 'individual' in class, and that was to let him know that I was unhappy that he had not submitted his homework that day, and that his performance on a specific task was not up to par. Though I communicated neither of these points in anger, and I do think it was important to clarify these points to him, if this is the sum total of my individual interactions with him, I can see a big problem'.

Another participant stated,

"During classes I become overly-focused, I guess sometimes overwhelmed… by just trying to stay on time with my plan and getting through the content. I forget about thoughts I wanted to share with certain students, and when I do talk to individuals it is really just re-explaining my task instructions or trying to keep them on task".

3.2 Patterns of time allocation to student 'types'

Participants in this study were asked to recall and reflect on learners in two different course offerings they taught, and to reflect on learners who they felt were performing academically at the top, middle and bottom of these classes.

Table 3: Teacher's reported interactions with learners with different levels of perceived ability/performance

I spend equal amounts of time with students at each level of ability/performance	25%
I spend more time with high performing students	17.5%
I spend more time with students performing at a middle level	10%
I spend more time with students performing at a lower level	47.5%

There is a significant difference between the amounts of individualized time given to students who teachers perceived to have different ability levels or performance levels in their classes. Students viewed as performing at a comparatively low level received the greatest amount of teacher time, followed by high performing students, with least time allocated to mid-level performing students.. As one respondent put it

"Basically I help the weaker students individually the most, cause if I don't they may fail and not improve… the middle group I guess I kind of forget about as they are doing ok...I spend a bit more time with the more advanced students as I am afraid they are not challenged enough and I try to take a little time to push them a bit more".

3.3 Patterns in knowledge of students

Despite the fact that many participants reported not often having the type of communication that could be most developmentally appropriate with their learners, many, when asked to reflect on their learners, had deep and insightful knowledge of individual learners. Many were able to give overall accounts of each student, as well as recalling specific behaviours and interactions. When asked to reflect, they could draw out this knowledge, and subsequently arrive at some desired 'points of action' for each student. However, 25% of participants were unable to recall or discuss individual students in detail. Although a minority, this is a substantial amount of educators with little recall of specific learners they had recently taught in relatively small classes that were given with high frequency (all of the participants in this study had classes that met two or four times a week across a 15 week semester).

3.4 Communications with students are often not 'dialogues'

Participant responses about their communications with students were coded into four categories, as outlined in the table below.

Table 4: Types of teacher communication with individual learners

Instructional	Explaining a concept or an instruction in more detail
Motivational	Trying to positively support students
Disciplinary	Informing a student that a behaviour or level of work was unsatisfactory
Facilitative	Posing questions to learners to prompt more learning

In most of these cases, teachers stated that the communications were not for the most part, dialogues, and when they were, they were very short, because of whole class demands on time.

4. Discussion

For the subjects in this case study, the themes arising from their analysed responses are very clear. Apart from occasional out of class dialogues (sometimes instigated by the teacher, sometimes the learners), most of the educators agreed that they were not giving their students the amount or type of individualized support they would like to. Equally important is that this discovery was surprising for a large number of the participants, which indicates that reflection on individual learners is not a prioritised or routine element of their teaching practice. However, a very positive finding of this research was that the majority of teachers (even teachers who do not often engage in dialogue with learners) had strong understandings of and ideas for specific learners, when prompted to reflect on the learners.

This highlights the importance of making learners a central element of in-service training and educational discussions, as well as in pre-service training. University educators particularly, are often discipline specialists rather than education specialists. As such, some burden must fall on institutional professional development programmes for expounding and sharing what learning theorists continue to discover about learning.

It was also clear that teachers differentiated in their allocation of time to certain types of students, with a heavy weighting of individualized support going to weaker or lower performing learners. One explanation for this could be the pressure and rigidity of prescribed learning outcomes - high achieving learners may have already exceeded them, mid-level learners are likely to achieve them, and lower-level learners may struggle to achieve them. Differentiation between students is something that is viewed by teachers as a criterion of good teaching (Devine, Fahie & MacGillicuddy, 2013). However, this does not necessarily equate to a difference in the amount of time given to different types of students based on ability as measured against a prescribed standard, but rather different understandings of and approaches to 'different' students. Provided an equitable environment where all learners have the opportunity to work to their potential requires a different conceptualisation of need.

In order to provide more individualized support, some repositioning is likely required on the part of teachers. Logistically, this means repositioning in planning and practice. Teachers need to create time and opportunities to first watch, wait and listen to students so as to best know when and how to speak with them. Secondly, time is needed to allow these dialogues to occur. Current practices, such as discussion and group based classes, and flipped classes substantially increase the time available for this. In such classes, teachers have time to observe, and to think about what interactions would be useful for different learners, and also about when to have them.

This repositioning is occurring in a different way in some educational settings, where teaching is being replaced or complement by facilitating, coaching, advising. A pertinent and practical example here is that of learning advising. In language learning, an advisor "is an educator who works with (usually individual) learners on personally relevant aspects of their language learning development. Thus advising in language learning involves the process and practice of helping students to direct their own paths so as to become more effective and autonomous language learners" (Carson & Mynard, 2012, p. 4).

As the above definition shows, while an advisor will assist the learners with language learning, the advisor does not have a specific curriculum to 'teach', nor usually a specific timeframe within which to teach it. In fact the advising process involves a lot less teaching and a lot more listening, as this is necessary to clarify the more pressing needs of the learners. It also requires the learner to speak more, in order to work his or her own way (with assistance) through the learning process and content. As such, it provides a good example for teachers to see how to engage in more active listening, and of the learning benefits to students of doing so.

This is very important in light of the data seen in this study. Although a large proportion of participants were able to give a detailed written account of specific students, this account was largely based on observed performance, and not on insights gained from the learner himself / herself, or from the collaborative dialogue between teacher and learner. While teachers observations may indeed be often accurate (particularly from more experienced and intuitive teachers), this may not always be the case, and then, there is the absence of the wealth of information that can come from the learner's contribution (Breen, 2001; Moore 2000). As one of his five principles of instruction, Merrill (2002) posits that "learning is facilitated when new knowledge is integrated into the learner's world" (2002, p.45). If we acknowledge that each individual constructs his or her own world, then without accessing this (through dialogue with the learner), we are already at a learning loss.
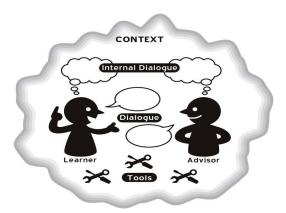
Figure 1: Mynard & Carson (2012). The Dialogue, Tools and Context Model for advising in language learning, p.33.

As can be seen in the figure above, the dialogue between the learner and advisor (or in our case, teacher) is at the centre of this relationship. This means interactions with students individually in classroom or lecture settings can be one of the most central elements of their classroom learning experiences. Learning advising involves prioritising 'active listening' (Kelly, 1996) over directive instruction, and requires the advisor to take on a subtle role in order for the learner to develop the decision-making, reflective and evaluative skills that may not have been part of their previous learning experiences (and thus absent from their learning schemata), in order to understand "how expertise should be developed" (Pelligrino, 2004, p. 28). In a classroom context, spending time empowering learners in this way decreases the need for further individual assistance over time, as individuals become increasingly active agents in their own learning.

5.   Conclusion

Educators have yet to find a perfect solution to the conundrum that sees the benefits of group learning and the economic necessity of teaching learners in groups sometimes working at odds against the individual nature of the learning experience and the benefits to learners of individualized feedback and teacher–student interactions. This paper provides some suggestions in this regard for educators working in traditional settings.

The explicit incorporation of individualised feedback and interactions with students into both teaching training practice and ongoing in-service training for educators at all levels could have a far-reaching impact. For the teaching population in the case study discussed in this paper, outside of disciplinary communication (i.e. relating to misbehavior in class, un-submitted work) only 22.5% of participants reporting regularly planning for individualized communications they wished to have with learners in upcoming classes. However, this was not due to a lack of knowledge about individuals. As seen in the case study, the major of teachers could, when allocated time, provide detailed information about their students as well as individualized instruction and support they could give. What is required is a change in focus in regard to lesson planning and allocation of teacher time in the classroom, in order to structurally incorporate this practice with high or higher regularity.

The majority of teachers in this study found that their communicative interactions with individuals were often not in line with what they felt about individual student performance and what they wanted to communicate. In other words, the message they were giving to students ran counter to what they wanted to say to. Teacher communication with individuals was often not based on knowledge gained from waiting, watching or listening, but was rather much more reactive, and often the result of less salient factors.

Finally, time was cited as the greatest barrier teacher's face in providing individual support. This lack of time is not helped by the "increasing emphasis on performativity and audit cultures in education systems" (Devine et al, 2013, p. 83). As one reflective respondent put it

"I am rather shocked at the gap between what I wanted to say to my students and what I have actually communicated to them. I take responsibility for this, and can see how I can change my practice in this regard, and how powerful this could be. However, I am afraid that the constant demands to measure students' performance and, my performance, are going to get in the way of this".

What may be required is a change not only on the part of classroom educators and those who train them, but also national and institutional education systems, and curriculum and instructional designers, from a focus on teaching time and measurement, to learning time.

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