

Evaluation of Mrs. Scholten's World History Classroom

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The classroom I chose to evaluate was Cathy Scholten's tenth grade World History class. There are 22 students in this first hour class. The desks in Mrs. Scholten's classroom are set up in 6 rows of 4-6 chairs. Students are assigned seats and all seats in the back row are empty. General observations from both visits indicate Mrs. Scholten has excellent classroom management skills as students for the most part were actively engaged and there were only a few minor disruptions.

The first semester of the course covers history from the earliest river valley civilization through approximately 1300 CE. The unit I focused on for this assignment was Ancient Rome. At the beginning of each unit, Mrs. Scholten provides the students with a handout that identifies vocabulary terms to be learned and a list of the learning objectives that indicates students "should be able to respond to each of these prompts by the end of this unit." In addition to the vocabulary and objectives, each student is given a calendar outlining topics for each day and dates for homework assignments, reviews and the unit test. (It is noteworthy to mention that Mrs. Scholten has been through three years of Assessment for Learning training and is one of the Hickman AFL trainers.)

For the Ancient Rome unit, there were twelve learning objectives for the Ancient Rome unit written in student-friendly language. Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis & Chappuis (2006) refer to these as clear learning targets or statements of intended learning that are clear and usable. For example, one objective was written as follows: "I can compare and contrast the structure of government of the Roman Republic and the U.S. This means I can identify how the two republics are similar and how they are different according to leadership, structure, laws and justice." Objectives for the two days I visited the classroom were:

I can describe the culture of early Roman life. This means I can describe their lifestyle, dress, gender roles, entertainment, literature and art.

I can analyze the causes of the fall of Rome. This means I can examine economic, political, social and military issues and determine how they influenced the fall.

In addition to the learning objectives, there were 23 vocabulary words that students “should be able to identify...by the end of the unit”. The unit spanned 14 days from introduction through the unit exam.

Learning Theories

Assimilative learning is the type of learning that very often takes place at school when students are learning new information that easily fits with their prior knowledge whereas accommodative learning implies a restructuring of that prior knowledge that becomes permanent (Illeris, 2006). I would speculate that most of what occurs in Mrs. Scholten's classroom would fit into the assimilative learning category, however, most of these students have never been exposed to world history from this early time period, therefore, permanent restructuring of current thought processes most likely would have to occur at some level. The majority of the information or learning that occurs in Mrs. Scholten's classroom would be considered declarative knowledge, basically factual information that students have to recognize or recall (Murphy & Alexander, 2006) that is learned through accretion, “an elaboration or extension of existing knowledge structures resulting from experience or the acquisition of relevant information (Murphy et al., p. 44, 2006).

Based on research by Illeris (2006) in order for learning to occur teachers must not only teach the content but must take into account the student's prior knowledge, as well as where they are emotionally, what motivates them, and the influences of their outside environment. This can be an overwhelming task when faced with a classroom of diverse students.

Based on my observations and what I know of Mrs. Scholten, it is clear she takes into consideration the diversity of her students, not just in race, ethnicity and gender, but in their learning styles as well. From just my two visits, I observed a variety of strategies and activities occurring that speak to her knowledge of diverse learning styles. For example, Mrs. Scholten plays music between classes and at the beginning of each hour while students are getting seated and she is taking roll. She explained to me she makes sure students are involved in some form of writing every day, whether an entry or exit pass or handouts with questions that require thought from the day's lecture. She made use of a mnemonic device to get students to remember important figures in Ancient Rome. She used a PowerPoint presentation during her lecture which included not only written information but at least one graphic that visually reinforced the information. One assignment required the students to take the role of a journalist during the Roman Empire and write the obituary for one of six different leaders of that time. She regularly makes use of group work that requires students to interact with one another. For each unit, students label a map, in this case, Ancient Rome, identifying important cities and geographical features. In this particular unit, a movie on Ancient Rome was shown.

Students appeared to be very comfortable in Mrs. Scholten's classroom. There were very few classroom management issues. When she asked specific students to quit talking they responded appropriately. When one student kept talking she asked him to move to another seat. He did so with little disruption. When she asked questions of the class a variety of students attempted to answer her questions. She was very respectful of those students who either didn't have the correct answer or, in one instance, a student who obviously didn't know the answer but wanted to be the clown. She did a great job of responding without humiliating or demeaning the students. I was quite impressed.

Instructional Strategies

While Mrs. Scholten used a wide variety of tools and techniques during the two classroom visits I made, generally speaking I would consider her main instructional strategy to most closely align with direct instruction as described by Lee (2002). On my first visit, I did not enter the classroom until ten minutes had passed, however, the learning objective for the day was written on the board. I will assume she used this to establish set. Mrs. Scholten used a PowerPoint presentation to present information about ancient Roman culture. Students had a handout in which they could take notes as she went through each slide. For the most part, students were taking notes, following along, and occasionally asking clarifying questions (information and modeling). Following the presentation, students were given another sheet which asked them specific questions from the presentation. She gave them a few minutes to write their thoughts down, then asked for volunteers to discuss their answers. A handful of students responded (checking for understanding). She then asked students to follow along as she read through the first part of another handout. This handout reinforced the PowerPoint, specifically addressing lifestyle, dress, and gender roles of ancient Romans (information and modeling). She asked them to scan back through the reading and identify specific points from the reading to list on the handout (guided practice). After several minutes she asked for discussion (assessment). While I suggest guided practice and assessment, I use those terms loosely because not all students were assessed for understanding. She concluded the discussion by referring back to the learning objective previously written on the board.

As for the effectiveness of the direct instruction, I believe Mrs. Scholten presented the information and modeled well. Lee (2002) recommended strategies such as use of visuals, connections to prior knowledge, signals (or cueing to focus on particularly important points),

pacing (pausing for reflection and processing) and summarizing for this phase of direct instruction. Her use of the PowerPoint presentation to present information was direct and to the point and didn't go on too long, on two different occasions she referenced prior learning by stating, "Remember when we discussed...", throughout the PowerPoint she would stop and ask questions, and at the end of both the PowerPoint and at the end of the hour she summarized key points in the information. Where I feel she might have made some improvements was in the area of checking for understanding. Lee (2006) maintains that just because a student can answer a question correctly, does not mean they have understanding. While some students were able to answer the questions, Mrs. Scholten had to elaborate on most of the answers.

On a second visit I observed some group work that somewhat resembled cooperative learning, however, it wasn't as structured like true cooperative learning as defined by experts such as Kagan, Slavin, and Johnson and Johnson. Mrs. Scholten numbered students off into four groups of five and six to work on the causes of the fall of Western Rome. In groups students were to read over a list of contributing factors and then discuss the meaning and purpose behind each of the factors listed. Each group was assigned one specific section: political, social, economic, or military. Mrs. Scholten moved from group to group, providing comments and asking questions. Groups worked together for approximately ten minutes, and then Ms. Scholten asked for a spokesperson from each group. One member from each group shared their group's discussions while Mrs. Scholten asked clarifying questions.

Overall, I believe the group work was effective, however, there was no real accountability. Two groups appeared to take the task seriously and all members participated in the discussion. The discussion in one group was dominated by two people and the others didn't appear to be paying attention. The fourth group didn't work together at all. They never moved

their seats into a circle of any nature and never turned to each other to discuss the issue. When Mrs. Scholten got to that group, she tried to get them to work together but it was obvious they were not interested. She left it alone. One of the key components of good cooperative learning as identified by leading experts in the field is individual accountability (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2006). There was no real incentive for students to work together. It was apparent that the class was used to working in groups, however, it also appeared as if the students weren't entirely sure how to engage in a high-quality discussion, one of the major challenges of group work as identified by Barron & Darling-Hammond (2006).

Mrs. Scholten also made use of other instructional strategies throughout my observations. On my second observation, students were given a "door pass" as they entered the room in which they were asked to answer a question from the previous day's lesson. It appeared as if this was a regular activity as students came in and for the most part began jotting down notes. Mrs. Scholten then took a few minutes to discuss responses with the students, again, checking for understanding. Another strategy used was a variation of Kagan's "Think/Pair/Share" (Kagan, 1994) where students were to individually write a response to a question, then were asked to turn to a partner and discuss their answers, then students were asked to voluntarily respond to the class as a whole.

Overall, I believe all strategies employed were very appropriate. Mrs. Scholten did a good job of keeping the class as a whole involved and interacting and used a variety of strategies. Throughout both of my visits, she paced the class well. Activities were appropriately timed—enough time for the activity/presentation to be effective but not so long that she lost the students' interest.

The IPI score I would give for the first observation is a 4 (Teacher-Led Instruction). Students were paying attention as the teacher lectured while going through the PowerPoint. There was some brief discussion and students answered questions but for the most part, the teacher provided the instruction. For my second observation, I would give an IPI score of 5. Through participation in the group work, students were engaging in higher-order learning conversations. For the most part I would agree that they were “constructing knowledge or deeper understanding as a result of the conversations” (Valentine, 2007).

Assessment

According to Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis & Chappuis (2006), assessment *for* learning happens “while learning is still underway” (p. 31) or what we typically think of as formative assessment. Assessments *of* learning “are those assessments that happen after learning is supposed to have occurred to determine if it did” (p. 31), or in other words, summative assessments like unit and semester exams and standardized tests.

By utilizing clear learning targets that were written so that students knew what was expected of them, Mrs. Scholten conveyed her expectations to the students. Throughout one of the lessons she reminded students that they would have to be able to “compare and contrast...” and went on to explain that meant they had to explain the similarities and differences. She was very clear in what she wanted the students to know. What wasn't always apparent to me was how she was assessing all students *for* learning. She did collect the door pass previously mentioned after there was discussion and students did have to write their names at the top. In this way, she could easily identify what students had written, however, this would not necessarily assess learning. She did walk around during group work to discuss content with individual groups, but again, it would be difficult to assess all students this way. There was a homework

assignment where students had to use the textbook, *World History: Patterns and Interactions*, to answer what she termed “knowledge based questions”, and then included three “opinionated questions”. The directions suggested the students would be discussing their responses with a partner or group upon completion. I assume this homework assignment would serve as an assessment for learning, especially the opinionated questions that would require students to first know the information and then be able to draw inferences, make comparisons, and analyze that information.

The unit test, the assessment *of learning*, consisted of 40 multiple choice questions, four short answer questions worth 4, 4, 3, and 6 points respectively, and two extra-credit fill-in-the-blank type questions. Mrs. Scholten indicated that after AFL training and reading Stiggins' (2006) chapter on test planning, she took her existing test and used a test plan similar to the one in the book to identify strengths and weaknesses. She listed the learning targets, determined the importance of each target in relation to the unit and then identified which targets the questions referred to. She threw out some questions, added new questions, and had to re-write some of them so they matched the language of the learning target, i.e. analyze versus explain or describe.

Chappuis (2004) maintained that a key component of assessment for learning is the involvement of the student in the assessment process. Classroom strategies should require students to analyze their own progress and be able to communicate what they have learned and how they can improve. Students need to be taught skills to assess their learning. “In formative assessment, students learn the skills of self- and peer assessment so that...they collaborate with their teachers in developing a shared understanding of their current learning status and what they need to do to move forward in their learning” (Heritage, p. 142, 2007). During my two observations in Mrs. Scholten's classroom I saw little evidence of any specific self-assessment.

In my discussions with her following my observations she indicated she routinely has an end-of-unit reflection where she asks students to respond in writing to a series of open-ended statements such as “_____ was difficult to understand because _____”; “I could have improved on _____”, or “I need more information about _____.” She said that often she learns much more about her students and their learning than from the unit test itself. She admits that involving students in the assessment process is not only difficult but is time-consuming. She tried student conferencing in the past, and while she found it valuable, she lost a lot of class time to the conferencing and didn't feel the trade-off was worthwhile. The pressure to cover as much content as possible before Spring “testing” has prevented her from continuing this practice but she still tries to keep students involved in their own assessment through unit reflections and other questioning techniques.

Overall, I found this experience to be very worthwhile. It is very hard to find time to observe other teachers in action, especially those in other curricular areas. For the past ten years my course load has consistently been in hands-on computer related classrooms where the majority of my instruction is demonstration. It was interesting to experience a lecture-based classroom again and I'm so glad I chose to evaluate Mrs. Scholten's class. She is an exceptional teacher who obviously enjoys her job.

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