

Teaching Tips

A Forum for discussion and tips for
advancing teaching and learning at Mona

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Special points of interest:

- The Teaching Tips Newsletter is a publication of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at the UWI, Mona.
- The newsletter is published three times during each semester and a summer edition. It provides tips for improving teaching and learning in higher education and is available online (<http://myspot.mona.uwi.edu/cetl>) as well as in the office of the CETL.
- If you need additional teaching tips on specific classroom practices please contact us.

Becoming a Better University Teacher : Reflective Teaching Practice

Reflective teaching practice or pedagogical reflective practice is not something we talk about in higher education on a regular basis. Sometimes reflective practice is understood in terms of everyday reflection on practice. On the other hand, pedagogical reflective practice is concerned with the deliberate efforts of teachers to undertake sustained reflection on their teaching and engage in action for the purpose of improvement. Pedagogical reflective practice is often understood to take place within a learning programme and it is concerned with self-directed efforts towards the improvement of one's teaching. So, pedagogical reflective practice is deliberate, systematic and self-directed.

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Some definitions of reflective practice

“The capacity of a teacher to think creatively, imaginatively and in time, self-critically about classroom practice” (Lasley, 1992, p. 24).

“A way of thinking about educational practice that involves the ability to make rational choices and assume responsibility for them” (Ross, 1989, p.22).

“Deliberate thinking about action with a view to its improvement” (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 40).

Reflective practice is oftentimes understood to be a process as well as a state of mind. It is rooted in inquiry, it is an honest critique of one's own actions, thoughts and feelings concerning one's own teaching. It is a about commitment to engaging in deep thinking about a process or an activity for the purpose of making improvements to it, in this instance, teaching. It is clearly an intellectual process involving analysis and interpretation. In some ways, it is similar to the learning process engaged in by students since it involves the construction of meaning. Teachers are invited to engage in a dialogue with themselves and others too about their pedagogy in a real self-searching way.

Stephen Brookfield, celebrated adult educator and a highly acclaimed author is a well-known advocate of reflective critical thinking. He challenges us as university teachers and others to consider our own “scholarly personal narratives.” By this he is suggesting that we need to pay attention to engaging in critical, reflective introspective analyses of our teaching experiences. These might be individual personal accounts of what happened to one teacher at a particular time, in one particular class and yet, it is an experience that might be similar to what is happening to another teacher in another class even during another semester. The experience should prompt engaging and incisive analysis as we determine what can be learned from it and how we can change and grow from it. In fact, as we share our personal narratives about teaching, we might create a learning ladder that others might use to ascend to richer and more meaningful teaching experiences.

References

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- Lasley, T.J. (1992). Promoting teacher reflection. *Journal of Staff Development*, 13, 1, 24-29
- Ross, D. (1989). First steps in developing a reflective approach. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 40, 2, 22-40.

Student Questions

Some university teachers encourage students to ask questions however, many do not. Participation in classes in colleges and universities continue to be very limited. In fact research suggests that only about 50 per cent of students participate. That is not enough and certainly, in many cases it is far less than 50 percent of our students who are participating by asking a question or responding to a question in class. Nevertheless, we all know that questioning is very important in teaching and learning and it is to be encouraged. In particular, the questions asked by students are absolutely pivotal in demonstrating that learning is taking place.

It is important that students develop a basic skill in framing good questions. As teachers, we should encourage questions as one of the approaches to develop critical thinking and reasoning skills. When students ask in-depth questions, we are able to get some indication as to how they are processing the content or how they are thinking about the topic. We might be able to determine how they are making linkages, associating new ideas to existing knowledge structures etc. The students questions provide an opportunity for the teacher to assess their knowledge. They might also reveal misconceptions about the topic.

In many classrooms, teachers ask questions and this leads to other questions by students. That is definitely what we should aim for, incisive student questions. Questions asked by students are able to promote learning much better than questions asked by teachers. In many instances, teachers are disappointed with the calibre of questions asked by students. Too many students are still seemingly comfortable in asking questions related to class activities and what is coming on the test. In fact, several of the questions are pretty mundane. However, a little known fact is that the questions asked by students tend to mirror those asked by university teachers. In this regard, if the teacher's questions are predominantly the simple ones, more so recall-based questions, pitched at the lower level of the Bloom's taxonomy, then invariably, the students will ask those types of questions. If the teacher ask higher order level questions, pitched at the higher levels of cognitive skills of the Bloom's taxonomy, students will tend to ask more of those types of questions as well.

Preparing Questions

The issue at hand for us as university teachers is "How might we help our students to ask better questions? Sometimes we ask students questions as they come to us. How about preparing questions to be asked in our classes? We plan questions to be used in the final examinations and mid-semester test but there are not many members of faculty who painstakingly plan questions to be used in our classes as we teach. We might want to ask ourselves about the questions that come to us during teaching. Do they generally promote discussion and cause additional questions? Is it possible that if we put some thought into planning questions, we might generate thought provoking questions that would inspire greater levels of participation in our classes?

Promote questions by posting them

There is no doubt that questions promote thinking and sometimes you will want to pose higher order thinking questions that might not be answered immediately but incrementally or over several classes. Have student write down some questions. Post questions in your PowerPoint presentations or on the Learning Management System (LMS) or OurVLE for us at UWI, Mona. Play with the questions because they have a way of turning over the ones mind.

Sometimes it is worthwhile to ask questions that you do not know the answer to and brainstorm with the students. It might also be good to ask questions that you can't answer but there is a possibility that those questions can be answered. We can challenge students to seek to respond to those questions over the semester or so.

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