Creating Learning Environment in Business English Teaching*

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Based on my practice in teaching business English courses over the past decade, I intend to propose a model for creating a conducive learning environment by utilizing feedback and teamwork in classroom. This paper may give my professional colleagues a starting point in the way they think and take actions to move towards a more engaging and constructive learning environment. It may also stimulate ideas and experiments in them and their classes as they seek to integrate these kinds of practices into their teaching of any course.

Keywords: learning environment, teamwork, feedback

Introduction

While businesses are looking for employees who can work effectively in teams, business schools are being criticized for not preparing students with the necessary team-related skills. Managers have complained that business schools place too much emphasis on quantitative and analytical techniques at the expense of team-related skills. The negative experiences that students often have with course teamwork do have bad impact on their team participation in later employment. Many negative experiences can be attributed to lack of development in team processes. Course teamwork can function successfully with a little classroom time spent on development and training.

Because of the increased emphasis on and use of teamwork in companies and organizations of all types, university teachers, especially those in business schools and related areas, have been using teamwork and feedback in various ways in their courses. Such inclass use of teamwork and feedback has been strongly endorsed and supported by companies and organizations. They repeatedly indicate that the increased use of teamwork in the “real world” has increased students’ need for exposure and experience with teams. Therefore, the increased use of teamwork and feedback for course projects is highly justified. In this article, I use my classroom-based experiences and feedbacks from students to illustrate the improvements we have made during my business English teaching.

Background

If Quality-oriented education and its key principles are to be the basis of everything we do, then as teachers these principles must become a natural part of the fabric of each of our courses. They must add value to the attainment of both the purpose of the course and the reason for the educational experience and become a part of

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factors of a continual learning environment. When I first started trying to bring the principles and practices of Quality-oriented education into my business courses in the classroom, I was thinking clearly for myself four things: First, the dual purpose of a university is to preserve, extend, and disseminate knowledge, and to develop the next generation of minds. Second, the reason why students enrolled in universities is to have that development occur in a specific discipline of interest. In a business course, this simply means that a student desires the teacher to do what needs to be done to them, in an ethical manner, to make them more attractive to the business world. Third, the service provided, education, is a highly interactive service which is created and delivered through the interaction of the teacher's mind with the students' minds. Fourth, it is the teacher's job to create an environment that makes this interaction possible for all.

To utilize the above insights, I did the following:

First, I had to know and make clear the purpose of each of the courses I taught and to determine what was to be accomplished in each course.

Second, I had to determine how each course fits into the larger development process in the student's chosen area of interest.

Third, as I wanted to utilize the principles and practices of Quality-oriented education to establish the culture needed to create and deliver this service.

Fourth, I realized, particularly with respect to constructive feedback and teamwork, that the students in my classes would not only know how to do this but also know it was appropriate and essential to do this.

Fifth, I recognized that change has to start with me. To effectively lead the change process and to create the atmosphere of trust necessary for the students to change, I had to change too.

New Framework

Given the above, what was next? Using my teaching philosophy and the answers to the above questions, there are several themes I integrate into my courses.

Theme 1: Purpose and Tone

Each course starts with a welcome followed by a statement of purpose for the course, it is a statement of what the course is designed to achieve. This lays out, as our first order of business, the value function that I and my students will use to evaluate everything we do in the course for relevance, appropriateness, and value-added vs. costs-added. I explain to the students the importance of a value function and inform them they have not only the right but also an obligation at any time to ask me when they are in doubt of how a particular topic is relevant to achieving the course purpose. This sets a tone for the whole semester for both of the teacher and the students to follow.

Next, I utilize this purpose statement to discuss the content implications and process implications for the course. I explain not only what we will cover but also how and what I will value along the way. This "deepens" the tone for the course and plants the major seeds for feedback and teamwork. I emphasize that the course is focused on learning and explain our mutual responsibilities in that process. I promise in writing "to create an environment in which you (the students) can learn, to be as prepared as possible, to respect each of you and your opinions". If I do not live up to this promise, I tell the students it is their job to tell me. I further note that I expect the same preparedness, candor, and respect from each of them in all their dealings in the course with both myself

and each other. When this is not the case, I need to know immediately and I will facilitate a process to resolve the issue. Finally, I reinforce the above statements throughout the semester with actions consistent with the above statements, frequently gathering feedback on whether or not I am living up to my promises and/or how the course is progressing. For example, if during the semester, I observe students not being prepared, candid, or respectful, I ask them to articulate how they view their actions, statements, thoughts, etc., as consistent with the ground rules I laid out. This is very beneficial in clarifying misunderstandings and teaching what a learning environment is truly about.

Theme 2: Individual Team Development

I develop this theme when I ask the class work in teams throughout the course. Typically, I utilize “content-design” teams. Basically, a content-design team is a group of 4–6 students who study a topic in the course in-depth, become the resident class knowledge experts on the topic, design and deliver a class presentation on the vital few insights on their topic, and write a more in-depth paper on the topic. I provide the students at the start with the answers to the three basic initial team questions: Who are we? Why are we here? What is expected of us? I follow this by gathering their preferences on teammates and topics, form them into teams using this information, and start the team building process for each team.

Since an awareness of “who we are” already occurred on the first day, I begin this phase of development by addressing for the students “why are we here” by means of a chart. This chart includes explaining to the students what we are about to do and why, what we are trying to accomplish, and what are the possible topics for the semester. Input is then gathered from each student on their topic and teammate preferences as well as any special circumstances I should be aware of in forming the team. Typically, I give the students a few calendar days to do this.

Teams are then announced in class and the focus shifts to, “so what do you do when you are on a team”. I assign the teams a basic likes/dislikes exercise to be done in the classroom in their teams. Additional team building exercises and team tasks are assigned throughout the semester. The assigned tasks help the team build an operating framework and include input to me on presentation dates and preferences, development of ground rules, development of a top-down flow chart planning out their process, and so on. The team building exercises include work on group think and constructive feedback. For each task, I provide written feedback on how to improve. For each team building exercise, I challenge them to address what they learned and why it is important. We then discuss these gains collectively as a class.

Theme 3: Model Feedback and Create Opportunities

On the first day of class, I start modeling good feedback principles and habits. Initially, as we review the purpose and implication statements for the course, which I utilize as my syllabus, I point out which pieces are a result of previous classes’ suggestions and why. Next, I tell them the common themes I have observed in my past evaluations concerning my teaching style such as trouble finishing on time and tangents not clearly tied back to the material. At the end of each week, I ask the students questions like: How are we doing? What can we improve? Are we going too fast or too slow? Does the material make sense? About one month into the semester, I point out how such questions are part of establishing good learning habits. Next, I consciously ask them to note one thing they would not change in the course and one thing they would. I then model how to receive that feedback, asking

for clarity, explaining my view, and asking how we can address it. I make sure to use some of this feedback to make changes right away.

As a final step, I make sure that after any experiment I try that semester and at the end of the course I ask for written feedback. I have developed my own forms which focus on what goes well, what needs attention, and if there is anything else I need to know. If the students have worked in teams in the course that semester, I ask each team to provide written feedback to me on their experiences at the end of the semester. Also during the semester, after the team has given their presentation, each student in the audience and I provide the presenting team with written feedback. This helps the students learn how to give and receive feedback as well as how to utilize feedback to improve.

Theme 4: Content Feedback

I structure written assignments to optimize the opportunity to learn. I state that the reasons for an assignment are to have a good discussion in class on the topic, to give them the opportunity to seriously think through the issues with respect to the topic, and to practice their writing.

With this in mind, I encourage students to discuss the assignment with fellow students but require that the write-up must be an individual effort. The four key attributes in writing I look for include content, flow, articulation, and clarity; or as I tell them: Do you have anything to say? Can you say it in a clear, intelligent manner? I ask that the papers be typed and double spaced and not turned in until after the class discussion. This allows students the opportunity to refer to their work throughout the discussion and to add notes on ideas missed/insights gained. Once turned in, I will provide extensive written feedback on the typed part of each paper with particular attention paid to the above attributes. Papers are graded on a 5 point scale with 3 being what I expected, 4-hoped for, 5-meritorious, 2-a good start, and 1-well at least you turned it in (but I am concerned about your ability). When papers are returned, I provide the class with a histogram and class improvement opportunities. I then note how my “goal” is for the entire class to score 3 or higher and explain how the class improvement opportunities can make this happen. Finally, I note that each paper has more specific improvement comments which I will gladly discuss with them individually. I also show them their previous assignment histograms so that they can see their progress as a class.

Theme 5: End of Semester Learning

At the end of each semester, I take a day to do my check in the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle. First, I reflect on the semester and note what I thought went well. Then I read all the feedback forms and note what the students thought went well and what did not. From this, I identify 2–4 things to change next time I teach the course. Next, I pull out these same lists from previous semesters to see if I am making progress. Finally, I put my identified changes in a folder with my course materials and utilize them the next time I teach the course. Suggestions on improving my teaching are also welcomed.

Conclusion

So what have I learned from all this? It is possible to incorporate the principles of Quality-oriented education, in particular constructive feedback and teamwork, into the fabric of the course. It is possible to create a learning environment as described and the educational experience is better because of it. When the students were asked

what they liked about my courses, they noted that they were treated with respect; their ideas were actively sought and listened too. When they were asked what was different from other classes which utilized teams they replied, “Other classes utilize groups which they call teams. In this class, Ms Wang develops us into teams”. They went on to point out how much they learned from each other, and how they helped each other. The above types of comments are common to my business courses. The most frequent written feedback I receive involves an appreciation of the environment created.

Admittedly, I am very excited and pleased with the differences practicing the principles and practices of Quality-oriented education, in particular teamwork and continual feedback, in my classes. I share my story in the hope of stimulating ideas and experiments in my professional colleagues and their classes as they seek to integrate these principles and practices into their teaching of any course. My generic advice to a colleague would be to experiment with ideas which enhance the delivery of their course content and over the semester to allocate the equivalent of 2–4 hour class periods for the semester. My incorporation of the principles of Quality-oriented education into the fabric of my courses has made me a better teacher, and has helped me create a learning environment in the classroom. When people ask me what the secret of my success is, why I have such student loyalty, I tell them this: First, treat your students like people and learn from them as they learn from you. Second, drive everything from purpose. Encourage your students to question the relevance of anything you do, where relevance in the class is defined by that initial course purpose noted on the first day. Do the same for them. Third, take the time to develop the necessary student skills, in particular, feedback and teamwork. Also, make sure to develop their ability to use those skills. Finally, lead by example. Internalize the principles and practices of your teaching so that you first consciously and then eventually unconsciously utilize them in the classroom.

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