



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (NISOD), COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN • WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION

The Competencies Class: An Old Idea Reconstituted

In the era of outcomes assessment, the competencies class is a method of teaching that deserves consideration. Simply defined, a competencies class requires students to demonstrate acquired abilities and learned skills. The idea works well in such courses as music or speech, but it can be applied to any subject.

I use it successfully in a class entitled Music for Classroom Teachers. This class is required for most elementary education majors (most four-year colleges require it). Seventy percent of my students come to this class with no previous knowledge of music; that is, they do not sing, and they do not read music. In one semester, I must teach them to do both. The students are informed the first day of class that they will be required to pass a competency test in each of the following areas:

- musical show and tell (demonstrate or explain a musical item)
- sing the class roll call (teacher will select the melody and provide a list of names)
- play the tonette (teacher will select a melody from the tonette book)
- sing/teach a song to the class (student chooses a selection from the text)
- teach a musical game (a book of games is available)
- rhythmize your name and perform it for the class
- perform a musical accompaniment (students are familiarized with autoharp, piano, and tone bells)
- perform, as required, patschen, African meter, and aleatory music.

I demonstrate all of these skills several times before testing student competency. The students are often very reluctant to perform before their classmates; however, they agree that the ability to perform or speak before peers is essential for success. Not only do the students learn to perform musically, but they learn how to function and interact with other people while they are the focus of everyone's attention.

The competencies do not need to be taught or learned at a professional musician's level. For example, the accompaniment can be performed with two chords (pressing two buttons on an autoharp) and a half hour's practice. The music room is available to students who wish to practice before and after class. The

tonette is used to teach music notation and to help the students orient their voices to notated pitches.

On the day a competency is tested, each student puts his/her name and date on an evaluation sheet. I collect and shuffle the sheets then call on the students in the shuffled order. Students receive their evaluation sheets and their grades immediately after performing. They appreciate the instant feedback.

Name _____ Date _____

Proficiency _____

Poor _____ Excellent _____

Foot tap _____

Pitch and intonation _____

Dynamics _____

Note values _____

Eye contact & enthusiasm _____

Voice projection & quality _____

Tempo _____

Phrasing _____

Accompaniment _____

Following instructions _____

Grade _____

Students enjoy the competencies class because they learn specific, tangible skills; and teachers like the method because it puts a great deal of responsibility for acquiring each competency on the student. The outcomes are obvious and easy to measure.

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Improving Teaching Effectiveness Through Self-Observation

Teachers are accustomed to being observed by their students, by their supervisors, and occasionally by their peers. However, feedback from these observations is limited. Student reactions usually are not documented until the term has nearly ended. Supervisory observation, for the purpose of overall evaluation, is a limited number of classroom visits, constrained by items on an evaluation instrument. Peer visits may provide more immediate information, but visitors usually observe little more than a slice of classroom life.

Others, through their observations, may point out strengths and weaknesses, but it is only when we see for ourselves that we can internalize and act on new insights.

There are many ways that we can observe ourselves as teachers. Some techniques that offer the most immediate and detailed feedback include student questionnaires, audio or video recordings, and observation sheets.

Student Questionnaires

Teacher-generated student questionnaires tap directly into students' reactions. Typical student evaluations are generic and given near the end of the term. Questionnaires distributed throughout the semester allow an instructor to address specific aspects of course content or delivery and to make timely instructional decisions. A simple list of questions relating to the day's lesson can indicate whether review or elaboration is necessary the next day. Responses to a brief list of questions about a new technique can evaluate the activity quickly. Questionnaires can be tied to a particular classroom activity or to the content of a week-long lesson. The advantage of the teacher-generated questionnaire is that it can be tailored to fit the needs of the instructor. Moreover, students can be asked to submit their own questions or comments on notecards. A bulletin board in a CAI class can provide a useful conduit for information.

Taping

Audiotapes and videotapes can be painfully revealing, but many faculty who have used these techniques admit that they provided valuable insight. Perhaps a better use of these methods, other than dissecting teaching performance, is to use them as tools for discovering what is going on in the classroom. A video camera focused on the classroom-at-large or on students involved in group work can provide useful

details. While involved in teaching or working with groups, it is impossible for the instructor to observe all students at all times. Taping can provide some insights into the types of questions asked, amount of wait-time between questions and answers, patterns of interaction in the classroom, use of humor, group roles, comings and goings from class, or off-task behavior.

Observation Sheets

An observation sheet is a useful tool for answering questions about teaching tools and classroom behaviors. For example, an observation sheet can be designed to include categories of questions about patterns of questions and answers; a colleague can use these categories to observe, take notes, and identify answers. An observation sheet can allow the instructor to critique items and activities in the use of class time.

Combinations

Observation techniques can be combined. For example, student questionnaires that ask students to comment on a class activity combined with a taping of that activity can provide an opportunity for a more complete evaluation. Or, using a taped session with different observation sheets can provide a variety of information over longer periods of time.

Conclusion

Self-observation is an important tool for improving one's teaching and attitude. This rejuvenation helps us stay interested not only in *what* we teach but in *how* we teach. Moreover, self-observation is a means of tracking one's development as a teacher and a way of sharing that development with colleagues.

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