STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING IN A FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION COURSE

I teach at a two-year college where the enrollment consists almost entirely of traditional-age college students. As is typical at other two-year colleges, courses in general and basic education are especially challenging. Student-centered learning has been an important tool for motivating students and enhancing their performance in the first-year composition course. I integrate the philosophy and concepts of Total Quality Management (TQM) into the teaching and learning process and get students involved in designing their *quality* education.

TQM is based on Deming's PDCA cycle: plan a process, do the plan, check or assess the results, and if successful, implement or act on the plan. As English teachers we typically follow a similar cycle. We have a plan (syllabus), follow the plan (course schedule), assess the results using writing and testing, and act on the plan as the students advance in the course.

Course Format and Content

On the first day of class, the students form teams (approximately five students per team, depending on the number of students in the class). They make name tags or tents which they display for several class periods until they get to know one another. I provide a skeleton syllabus and ask students to read the objectives and goals of the course to one another and become familiar with the basic purpose of the program. I also provide a list of policies which last-quarter students wrote so they have a jumping-off point for their own ideas. For homework, students are to prioritize what they wish to learn about writing and improving it, and wish to read during the quarter. I distribute copies of the table of contents from the textbook (often a handbook) used in the course. Anything in the text students do not wish to study is not to be prioritized. Students bring their lists to the second class period.

During the second class, nominal group technique, a TQM tool is introduced. Nominal group technique is a way of voting on the ideas which have been prioritized. I place the table of contents on a preprinted overhead. The teams organize the topics on the list into groups. Using another overhead transparency, I group the topics as the students have suggested. For example, students might consolidate assessing information and documentation, or pronoun reference and pronoun-antecedent agreement with subject and verb agreement.

Once the list is consolidated, students individually prioritize the topics they feel are most important for their success. I write these priorities on the overhead and arrange topics in a list from the highest to lowest priority. I then redesign the syllabus, using the student priorities. [Students often do not list "Writing Process" because they feel they learned enough about that topic in high school. Interestingly, they typically include the topic of punctuation. We do acknowledge, as a class, that even though "Writing Process" is not included, it does not mean that students do not have to draft, revise, and edit. Actually, during the course, students often use the writing process without realizing it during peer review and editing.]

Student Ownership

Students own the topics which are to be discussed during the course. They are in the syllabus because they put them there. Once the students decide upon the topics important to their success, they research and present material on those topics. My role is to facilitate the daily class sessions. It is important to note that a student-centered course is not a "teacherless" course. As a facilitator, I write the assignments, plan the activities, guide the discussions to assure that students are respectful of one another, and help students assess their progress throughout the quarter.

Students take an active role in their learning. The teams help determine the grading criteria and the point values for each assignment. They determine using other TQM tools, whether they will work as a team or alone on various writing projects.

Conclusion

After incorporating student-centered learning and TQM into a composition course, I found that students attend class more regularly (they usually determine the value for participation and attendance early in the quarter), participate actively, and are attentive. They form lasting friendships, spending time and studying together. Students take more ownership of their education and actively engage in decision making, problem solving, independent investigation, and collaborative learning. They learn that they are in charge of and responsible for their own success. There is a new spirit in the classroom and an increased emphasis on teams and student interaction.

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"PARA-PSYCHOLOGY" AND COMPUTER SKILLS

Often, our courses become so enjoyable to us as instructors that we forget our students may not always find such pleasure in our discipline. Recently, I was asked to teach an Internet course to paraprofessionals from the Lowell Massachusetts School District, employees who work as teacher aides at any of the Lowell schools and are offered a "return to school free" opportunity if they enroll in the Paraprofessional Certificate Program. As I had been teaching an Introduction to Psychology via the Internet course at Middlesex Community College, I was asked if I would be interested in modifying my course for this group of non-traditional students—adult learners, many of whom have been out of the classroom since high school graduation and are reluctant to accept new and innovative strategies unless there is a hands-on component. By including four classroom sessions, students had the opportunity for initial, individualized hands-on training with an instructor, which made the Internet aspect of the course more appealing.

In the first two sessions, students were shown how to use the technology to locate the psychology course website, download programs, and log on to the e-mail system used by all MCC students. After these two sessions, the instructor then becomes a facilitator. Students study and participate from home or work; the instructor stays in touch via e-mail to answer questions and monitor student progress. Students are directed to learn the course content through the website and textbook.

Throughout the course, homework assignments require students to use the web for browsing, researching, linking, and using email to complete assignments. Of course, the students can also meet with the instructor face-to-face. As the semester continues, students become more competent in using the technology, and the remaining two class sessions are used to teach and discuss content areas rather than technology.

After the initial hands-on training, students are able to complete all coursework at home if they have a computer and modem, or they can use the college's computer labs. Should students decide to accelerate, they may complete the course early. This course is perfect for working adults, parents, or anyone who needs flexibility in balancing school and other commitments. Not only is the website available at all times with directions, syllabus, and links to other sites, it provides a schedule to keep students on target.

Returning students recount using their newfound technological savvy. Fifty percent have taken additional online courses at Middlesex with great success. Other instructors have mentioned the quality of preparedness in computer literacy/technology these students demonstrate in their classes.

Through a twist of fate, an instructor finds that her Introduction to Psychology course is the perfect medium for teaching adult students computer literacy skills. In an independent learning course delivered through the web, e-mail, and textbooks, students can learn the fundamentals of psychology while learning how to incorporate web research and email in their college work successfully.

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