Teaching: The Ability to Understand, Action to Engage, and Building of a Relationship with Students

Through the education minor, I have learned that the classroom is an incredibly diverse place comprised of complex and unique students. Teachers should understand and learn from their students in order to create a safe and engaging environment, that builds a student’s motivation and interest. These insights are just a few ways that these safe and accepting learning environments can be created to meet the individual needs of a variety of students.

Insight #1: I learned that classrooms are incredibly diverse in aspects of gender, education, socioeconomic background, and ethnicity. Teachers must understand these different perspectives to reduce the stigmatization of students, and create an environment that allows all students to benefit from the variety of viewpoints.

All students in the classroom have a unique perspective due to their specific background, making it integral that educators teach students to be aware of and accept different ethnic, socio-economic, and other diverse backgrounds. Ignoring this difference of individuals within the classroom leads to the marginalization of certain students. Through my experience in Intergroup Dialogue Project, I learned the first step to understanding another person’s perspective is understanding one’s own privilege. This includes recognizing how privilege may vary between individuals due to their own culture, religion, or gender, etc. This concept can be used in the classroom, allowing teachers to recognize their own privilege, and how this may differ from their students. For example, I am a college-educated student from a homogenous suburb, but this does not mean that my students are from a similar background with comparable experiences to my own educational outlook. My CLASP learning student did not attend college and has worked on a dairy farm for the last 40 years before coming to work at Cornell Dining. This alters how I teach my student and the examples or activities that I plan in the lesson, from how I would teach a peer. The language I use to describe a computer program will be different from the language I would use with a college student, who uses a computer daily. Furthermore, the starting point of my lesson and the fundamentals I review for a student who has grown up with computers will be different from a student who is working with their first laptop. I have used this knowledge to create a more culturally aware space that attempts to make the learner more comfortable with the learning environment and therefore more engaged.
Schools play a large role in the socialization of students and their perspective on learning and motivation. Therefore, when teachers employ language and classroom management styles that are solely advantageous to students from a specific background, all other students feel isolated. This is a concept I have learned through a reading from class, *The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children* by Delpit. She explains how minority student perspectives and educational language is not considered in the classroom, leading these students to feel disconnected to the larger educational system. This is contrasted by the fact that white, middle-class perspective and language is often utilized in the classroom, effectively marginalizing all students who do not relate to this perspective. Furthermore, this may cause students to become disengaged and act out leading to the *labeling* of students (Rist, 2013). Labeling can cause the student to feel stigmatized and unmotivated to participate in the learning environment due to the preexisting expectations for their behavior from others.

The concepts of classroom language and management were applicable during my work with my elementary peer student, allowing me to better understand her background and actions. I was able to reflect on the power an educator can have when understanding a student’s unique background. Working with this student also illustrated the negative impact that stigmatization and labeling can have on a student’s behavior and motivation. My elementary school partner would continually ignore other students and teachers, refuse to participate in activities, and be disengaged. I learned through her teachers that she came from a single parent and low income household. She also told me that she did not like to participate in the educational activities because she struggled with reading and science. She was labeled the ‘troublemaker’ by her classmates, which led to her escalating behavior problems during the program. I came to realize that due to her unique background she did not relate to and struggled with what was being taught in the classroom. This disengagement led to her frustration with activities and thus her label as ‘a troublemaker’. This led to a cycle of disengagement and marginalization by her peers and teachers. The marginalization of this student and others can be prevented through creating an educational space that is aware of each student’s backgrounds and their educational perspective. By meeting these students needs and teaching in a way that resonates with them, through the utilization of certain language and activities, they are more motivated and engaged with the greater classroom experience.
This insight on understanding children’s diverse backgrounds and how to create an accepting environment will change how I act as a parent in the future. This understanding of diverse backgrounds will become increasingly important as the United States continues to become more diverse in religion, ethnicity, and culture. I expect my children to grow up and interact with children of different backgrounds in and out of school. I want them to learn in an accepting environment that does not marginalize students based on their background. Therefore, as a parent I can use my insights to critically analyze my children’s learning experience in school. This will not only allow me to understand the dynamic of my child’s classroom, but also encourages me to be active in school policies and my own treatment of children. For example, I could suggest that the school teaches cultural awareness and privilege in class, while also making an effort to teach this to my own children outside of school. This would teach students to be more aware and accepting of peers from different backgrounds.

I learned through this insight that children may not be acting out because they don’t want to learn, but they could be a victim of labeling theory or are misunderstanding the language used in the classroom. Therefore, as a parent I can voice this viewpoint during meetings with the administration and fight against school policies that may punish a student based on inaccurate assumptions that these students do not wish to learn. I would suggest that educators work with the children in question to make them feel more engaged and accepted by the other students. This could prevent the cycle of marginalization that would be detrimental to my child’s or another child’s engagement in the classroom. Furthermore, as a parent there may be times where I would oversee other children on fieldtrips, playdates, or a community event. I must be aware of my own privilege and how it may be different from the different children’s. This awareness and respect for the variety of backgrounds will make managing a group of diverse students easier. I will make a cognizant effort to have all children feel welcome. When asking my child to complete a task I might use the form of a question, while frame it as a command for another student. This knowledge of the language of the classroom and simple action, can make a student feel more engaged in the activity with their peers.

Insight #2: I learned that anyone can be a student, no matter their age or level of ability, and teachers must create an environment that meets each student’s needs; be it emotional or physical.

Anyone can be a student and this definition is not limited to a specific age group or students of certain abilities. As educators, we must create an educational environment that accommodates and adapts to their specific needs. While working through CLASP, I have come to recognize that there are many types of learners with a variety of abilities and experiences to enhance the classroom experience. For example, my CLASP partner is an adult learner who is a full-time Cornell Dining employee, and is learning how to use the computer in their free time. Due to Gregory’s age and educational background, he has different physical abilities and emotional needs than a younger student. This requires me to alter the environment to facilitate his learning. Younger students may also have physical or emotional needs in the classroom, so teachers must be aware of these needs and know how to create a safe environment for learning. By learning to view each student as an individual with their own unique abilities and experiences, we can create an environment that caters to each students’ needs and further engages and motivates them to learn.

As there are many types of learners, it is important for an educator to recognize a student’s specific motivation for learning, as it affects how they teach to best facilitate a student’s learning goals. For example, a grade school student may be motivated by grades, pressure from their parents, or the prospect of attending college. Whereas, an adult learner may have similar goals, they also exhibit strong internal motivation and genuine interest in the subject. My learning partner loves his job and while other students worked on career development with their partner, he wanted to learn the basic computer skills necessary for his job and to make his life easier. This included learning to Google search, working on Kronos and Workday. His motivation to learn and take the class was not due to external pressures from work, but his own interest and internal motivation. By recognizing his motivation, we could develop lessons and objectives that met his personal goals for the class.

I have experienced the necessity of adapting a lesson plan and classroom structure to meet a student’s needs during my work in the CLASP program. My student lacked some fine motor skills and had some eyesight and hearing trouble. These physical abilities were due to his age and may not be the same for all learners, or even adult learners. However, it illustrates the
importance of a teacher being aware of their student’s specific abilities and responding effectively to meet these needs. For example, I recognized how my learning partners motor skill limitations led to his increasing frustration with using computers. In response, I adapted to the situation by slowing down the pace of my lessons, as well as taking time to explain hand positioning methods for the computer mouse that would be most effective to reduce the strain of his hand. I did not ignore the problem, or complete the task for him, but altered the teaching style and environment to create an educational setting where he felt more able to complete tasks. In turn, this made him more comfortable with utilizing computers and more confident in his ability to learn and meet his goals. Additionally, using positive reinforcement through verbal encouragement has provided my student with emotional support, leading to the development of a more rewarding teacher-student relationship. The situation and teacher response will be different for each student, but the first step is recognizing the student’s limitations and acting in a way that creates an environment more conducive to learning.

This insight will be important in my future as a veterinarian, as I will spend a significant amount of time teaching clients and students of different ages and abilities about animal welfare and handling. Through my own internship experiences working in veterinary clinics, I have realized that veterinarians will have to explain procedures and medication administration to clients. This is often difficult as some owners may have physical limitations which make it difficult for them to understand a procedure or complete an at home treatment for their animal. My experience in CLASP as well as my insights on creating an accepting learning environment for students with different physical and emotional abilities will be essential. For example, I might have to teach an older adult with limited motor skills how to inject medication for their pet. I would teach them how to complete this task by practicing how to properly hold a syringe and then how to release the press the top to administer medication. This method of teaching skills is similar to how I approached teaching Gregory how to use the mouse. I would facilitate my client’s learning by decreasing the pace and how I teach. Furthermore, as a practicing veterinarian there will be veterinary school students and grade school students that come in to learn. This requires me to understand their unique abilities and how to alter a lesson to better facilitate their learning. For example, a student may feel frustrated with understanding the science behind a specific disease. As an educator, I must recognize the subject may be difficult
and stressful to learn, and respond through positive encouragement and reinforcement when they accomplish different levels of understanding of the subject.

**Insight #3: I learned that to have motivated and engaged students, educators must be actively interested in learning from and building a supportive relationship with each of their students.**

Growing up I believed students were the only ones learning in the classroom, but through my experiences from class and field work I have come to realize that teachers can and should take the time to learn from their students. I believe teachers who do not take the time to learn from their students and recognize that they have an equal responsibility to learn in the classroom, are doing themselves a great disservice. As teachers, we want students to be engaged and motivated to learn, but we must be equally as involved in learning from the student through communication and active engagement. Learning from a student and being interested in their achievement and progress can lead to a more fruitful student-teacher relationship that will further motivate the student.

As a CLASP learning partner, I would have set lesson plans to teach my student, but would constantly be learning from my student throughout the session. This new insight learned from one learner, has the potential to improve future lessons and future students’ learning experience. For example, during my initial lesson with my learning partner I was ready to explain the fundamentals of Kronos and the process of approving his time card. Instead, we spent the lesson discussing how to log into his laptop, open Google, and create a Google search. This lesson was a learning experience for me, as it made me understand that as a teacher I cannot assume that everyone is starting from the same point in their knowledge; that a beginner level may mean something different for different students. Going forward I was able to tailor my lessons to Gregory’s pace and experience, building up his knowledge with computers before tackling Kronos. As learned in my classes, teachers use critical reflection both in action, during the activity, and on action, after the activity, to learn from the student. This insight can lead to the implementation of changes that improve future lessons. Furthermore, my field experience has taught me the importance of patience and honesty. A teacher may not have the correct answer or knowledge about the subject, but it is more damaging to the student and the student-teacher relationship to give an incorrect answer. This promotes trust and the creation of a trusting
relationship with your student, as you can communicate that you may not know the answer but are willing to learn it and share with the student.

Teachers can also use dialogue to learn about a student’s specific interests within and in addition to the subject of study. I have learned through class as well as experience, that this genuine interest in the student’s interests creates a bond with them. It illustrates that an educator understands the student is a complex and unique individual. Furthermore, this knowledge can be used to reinforce topics and make them more applicable to the student, thus enhancing their learning experience. For example, upon learning about a student’s interest in baseball I was able to illustrate how the internet can be used to find baseball collectables through a common search. This made a lesson that could have been boring, personal to the student and applicable to their life. By creating a space where the student is free to share their interests and question, the teacher is facilitating the development of a teacher – student relationship that makes the student more motivated to learn and interested in the topic.

The ability to learn from students and create a supportive relationship will be vital during my time as a veterinary student. During my last two years of graduate school, I will be a teaching assistant to younger students studying veterinary medicine. This will require my knowledge about creating an engaging space that promotes a supportive relationship with my students. This insight will encourage me to make an active effort to learn about my student, their background, interests within the medical field, and interests outside of class. I would use this information to make each student feel engaged in the topic. For example, I may learn that many of my students in dog physiology love to work with sheep. Therefore, I have a lesson where I ask them to use their own knowledge about sheep and their new knowledge about dog physiology, to explain the same process in the sheep. This allows them to learn the lesson, while being engaged because I brought in a specific species on interest. Therefore, they are applying the lesson and their knowledge to a new context, like scaffolding. I will use reflection to improve how I structure each lesson, learning from my student’s feedback on lessons, demonstrations, and explanations. As honesty is emphasized in this insight, I would be honest with my students to promote trust. It is more important that my students learn, than for me to always be right and have an answer. When I do not understand the answer to a student’s question or how to explain a concept effectively, I will admit this. Then, I would try to learn the concept and explain it to my student
the next lesson. This will make my students feel engaged and respected in the classroom, creating a trusting and fruitful student-teacher relationship.