Reflective Essay on LEARNING AND TEACHING

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I am Kerwin Anthony Livingstone, native of Guyana, South America. My country is the only English-speaking country in the continent of South America. Guyana means the ‘land of many waters’. This is the country in which the greater part of my educational life has been shaped. My decision to become a teacher and more specifically a Modern Languages teacher, developed from the secondary years of my educational experiences, since I wanted to impart knowledge to students as well. I wanted to do just what my teachers were doing.

I attended the Starters’ Nursery School and the St. Margaret’s Primary School, from 1982-1989. My aunt taught at the Nursery School there. Truth be known, I come from a family of teachers – aunts, uncles, close cousins – and this helped to shape me in becoming a teacher as well. I was always a very bright student throughout these years. I never gave my teachers a reason to complain about me. I was also dedicated to my work and always sought after knowledge, as I wanted to learn and experience new things.

From 1989 to 1995, I attended the St. Stanislaus College. It was in secondary school that my passion for modern languages grew and my thoughts emerged about possibly becoming a teacher. In understanding myself, my potential, and my interests, my Spanish teacher in particular, Mrs. Margot Forde, sparked my interest in learning and was also the first teacher I admired because of her teaching style and techniques. She demonstrated the importance of using hands-on activities with emphasis on active and student-centered learning. She tried as much as possible to get us involved in language learning. Honestly, I was never bored in her class. I was always intrigued, encouraged and felt motivated. In every class period, Mrs. Forde found ways of keeping us attentive and interested. She always demonstrated passion in what she did, and that stuck with me continually. Besides being a great teacher and a familiar and friendly face, she was also a great role model, always being available outside of class to discuss difficulties with homework or listen to students facing other types of problems.
Mrs. Forde knew of my abilities and she always encouraged me to do whatever I do with passion, conviction and pride. Those three words remained with me. In school, I was always very helpful to my colleagues. I always found myself helping my colleagues with their work. Some even hinted at my ‘good teaching skills’. Some suggested I become a teacher. These words influenced me greatly, the kind of person I have become and the kind of teacher into which I have transformed.

Still, with all that was being done, a surface approach to learning was adopted, since Modern Language teaching and learning was primarily executed by means of the traditional approach, the Grammar-Translation Method. This method involved a lot of memorisation, drills, recall, and so forth. It was believed that students had to learn this way, to be able to ‘understand’ important works of old. This is exactly how I was taught: everything had to be done from memory, with a view to recalling it at some later stage. All learning was done on the surface level.

My secondary school experiences influenced my decision to pursue a degree in Modern Languages. Eventually I moved to the University of Guyana (UG), where I did my undergrad degree in Modern Languages, specializing in Spanish and French (1999-2003). During these years, I encountered quite a number of role models in the form of Mr. Derek Archer (French Lecturer), Mr. Terrence Fraser-Bradshaw (Spanish), and Mrs. Melva Persico (Spanish). These three lecturers helped to solidify my interests in becoming a Modern Language Teacher. Their dedication and commitment to learning and teaching were ostensible. In the execution of their responsibilities, they ensured that students grasped concepts through the various methods that they employed. And they did work for me.

My colleagues always depended on me for information and for assisting them with their work. In essence, I was a peer teacher. The thing is, I was the only non-teacher in the group. All of the others were trained Spanish teachers. I was just doing the degree in Spanish/French because of my love for languages. Throughout the degree programme, we would all sit and go through the work while I directed the study sessions. They always were able to grasp what they had
difficulties with. And, again, they encouraged me to join the teaching profession as they felt I would make a good teacher. I said nothing, but gave it some thought. The way I was taught at the UG was not quite different from how I was taught in secondary school, in that instruction was teacher-directed, and I simply had to ‘do as I was instructed’. There was no space for critical inquiry. It was a matter of regurgitation, and this was thought to be ‘intelligence’, that the student had ‘learned’, that I had ‘grasped the concepts’. While this may have been true for me, it was not so for many others, as they were not as ‘bright’ as I was. Learning was not student-centred, and was very much superficial.

After completing my undergrad degree, I taught at two secondary schools in my country, from 2004-2006. When I first started as a teacher, I was truly oblivious of what teaching was all about. As a Modern Languages teacher, I just taught based on what was taught to me, following the textbook method, exercise and drills, translation, grammar, among others. That was the only method I knew. That was all I could teach. I just taught what I knew, and that was that.

I got the opportunity to go abroad to do a Master’s Degree in Applied Linguistics, specializing in Second and Foreign Language Teaching Methodologies. I was intrigued at this, as I knew that my teaching methods would now receive a boost with modern ones. And that is exactly what happened. I learnt many new ways and approaches to learning and teaching languages. My learning here was more student-centred: it focused on what I was doing, as I was the protagonist of my own learning experience. This was encouraging, and a breath of fresh air for me. My experiences here gave me the impetus to do things differently.

After returning from completing my MA degree, I started to lecture at the UG in February 2009. I am currently Lecturer II (Spanish), there. I teach courses in Spanish Language, Linguistics, Translation, History and Civilisation, among others. No job is without challenge, and mine was not. After returning from postgraduate studies, I was so excited to implement what I had learnt abroad. I was a bit disheartened, realising, 6 yrs later, there were no improvements at the UG. Face to face teaching was the only didactic method used. There was no visible innovation to
teaching and learning. Teacher-centred strategies were still current. Unfortunately, there was no other option than to resorting to the *chalk and talk method*, with little variation in how I did things. I was not able to implement what I had learnt abroad.

My on-the-job reward is seeing my students making an effort to learn, even in such non-conducive learning environments. With my knowledge of foreign language teaching, I do some innovative things in my classroom, despite the current challenges. Students actively participate in task execution. I usually prepare a student manual for my various courses, so that the students get some amount of autonomy of their own learning. Thankfully, the grades that they get do reflect that they have learned, and that is always comforting to a lecturer. While I did not have a grading criterion, I basically knew what to look for. If students requested explanations, as to why they got a particular grade, they were provided with it.

I pursued the Postgraduate Certificate and Diploma in Tertiary Teaching (PGCTT/PGDETT) at USP. I had decided to enroll in this programme, as the *sponsored* Postgraduate Diploma in Education for lecturers at the UG did not - and still does not - cater for those who attended church on Saturdays. The programme is all day on Saturday, in addition to there being no one to teach the Modern Language component of that programme. Those are the two odds against me. I wanted to be trained as a tertiary teacher. There were things I wanted to understand about my profession, things that were not fostered at the UG since most of the professional development sessions focused on administrative issues, and not on pedagogical issues. I felt that this programme would open up my perspectives and conceptions about learning and teaching in higher education, and help me to become a successful tertiary teacher.

At the beginning of ED 401, I did not know what to expect. I was wondering what the course was going to offer. As I reflect on my beliefs regarding teaching and learning, I find that my mission as a teacher is threefold: to promote positive learning, to spark learner enthusiasm for learning and to provide a strong foundation for lifelong learning. I am thankful for this opportunity. I am aware that the student-centred approach is the most desirable and favourable
for achieving student learning outcomes. Traditional methods are no longer apt.

While many teachers find it easiest to remain anchored to textbooks, I strive to find innovative ways of teaching that address the diverse needs of all of my students. In my classroom I offer a variety of approaches to the study of a foreign language. I believe that all of my students, with the help of the right tools, will be able to overcome any difficulties that the study of a foreign language might present. I don't mean that every student who enters my class will be able to express him or herself equally, but rather that each of my students will be guaranteed the opportunity to express him or herself to the best of his or her abilities. I believe that one of my best qualities as a teacher is my ability to inspire confidence in my students so that they feel comfortable expressing themselves, regardless of their level of ability.

In my opinion, I am not a Level 2 or Level 3 teacher. I would say that I am a Level 2.5, if such a level exists. This means that I am somewhere in the middle. I would definitely like to become a Level 3 teacher, which is the desired and effective level. In spite of my many challenges, the knowledge gained from this course will transform my pedagogical practices.

Learning and teaching have been an age-old practice. Throughout the years, these phenomena have evolved in different ways, benefitting some students and forsaking others. In the olden days, the teacher was the sage of the classroom who directed the show from start to finish. For too long, teaching and learning were teacher-centred, with no real concern for what the student was expected to do. He was either bright or not. And whether he was bright or not determined if he succeeded or not. This kind of scenario was counter-productive and only ensured that students used low cognitive skills to complete tasks, thus resulting in a surface approach to learning.

Given the changing scenes in university teaching and learning today, the call for teaching effectiveness and the diverse student population with different learning abilities entering tertiary institutions, constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang (2011) is the way to respond to these growing concerns about teaching and learning in the 21st century.
The value of constructive alignment (CA) in teaching and learning is priceless. CA is all about ensuring that there is harmony in the way students are expected to learn course content. This is not to be done haphazardly, but should be thoughtfully planned and crafted with the students in mind. The principal objective is to make learning student-centred, which is in sharp contrast to the traditional teaching approach. Shuell (1986) reveals that “it is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned, than what the teacher does” (p. 429). In essence, students are encouraged to be the protagonists of their own learning. They are the ones who are responsible for taking control of their own learning during task execution. During task execution, students are expected to use high cognitive skills to realize tasks, stimulating higher order thinking and a deep approach to learning.

As a tertiary teacher, I have found ED 401 to be of great benefit to me as I seek to transform my teaching for the betterment of the students with whom I come into contact. I have been able to see the great value derived from constructively aligning my teaching in order to enhance learning that matters, learning that emphasise creativity, application and life-long learning. Is this not what we want our students to be able to do, outside of the classroom setting? I can’t speak for others, but this is what I desire for my students, and I am therefore convinced that this is the way forward. I do realise the need to upgrade my teaching methods so that all students can learn. Constructively aligned teaching and learning is the solution to ensuring that all students learn.

The learning approaches in ED 401 have been very refreshing. I must admit that this has been novel to me, doing a course that is fully online. It has been the very first time that I have had to submit reflective writings, actually requiring me to design lesson plans. It is the first time that I have had to do micro-teaching. It is the first time that I have had to participate in online forum discussions. It is the first time that I have had to submit assignments on Moodle. I had heard the term ‘Moodle’ when I was doing postgraduate studies, but I never investigated further. It is the first time that I have been able to interact with such a large class, asynchronously. I have been engaged in independent and collaborative learning, which is what good teaching is all about. The reflective essay also proved to be very worthwhile, as it caused me to think critically, a vital component in contemporary pedagogical practices.
As it relates to improving ED 401, I have one suggestion: that there be some face to face classes. The face to face element continues to be very powerful in teaching and learning. I believe that since this is a teacher training course, we as tertiary teachers should be able to meet and interact ever so often. So much is derived, so much is achieved. For example, I barely know a few of the 57 students in the class, because I have met a few through micro-teaching. I would have liked to get to know all of them. To me, this would have made the course even more interesting. In a classroom setting, students interact with colleagues they know. The same should be applied here.

The arrangement of ED 401 has followed Biggs & Tang’s (2011) CA and I am eternally grateful for what it has done to/for me, as a tertiary teacher.

REFERENCES