

Relational Pedagogy Project Part I

Part One: Learning about the Students

To get to know my students, I will distribute a student questionnaire on the first day of my arrival at the high school. I have modified the sample questionnaire Kathleen Cushman presented in *Fires in the Bathroom* (Cushman 2003, pp.9-11), adding and changing questions as needed to suit the purposes of this project. The first section of the questionnaire (see Appendix) is an “introduction” to each student with basic information such as name and age. I designed the second section about hobbies, activities, and future plans to learn about each student's unique interests that he or she might enjoy sharing. The third section, about history-related interests and student learning, will provide valuable insight as to whether or not students are interested in history, what topics they might be interested in learning about, how they learn, and what their strengths and challenges are. This type of questionnaire could provide useful information for a teacher’s lesson planning in addition to building a closer-knit learning community. If possible, I will share some of my answers so that students can get to know me. I will follow up this activity with continued interactions with students during class so that I will continue to get to know them better during the three-week period.

Rationale:

Students have a variety of talents, abilities, interests, and characteristics that are not readily apparent to the teacher. Learning about students is important for a teacher to better connect with them. According to Cushman (2003, pp.4-5), one way to learn about students’ unique qualities is to ask them directly, which could take the form of a questionnaire. Questionnaires can include information about general interests so that a teacher can learn about students’ day-to-day lives, extracurricular activities, personalities, and cultures to gain a deeper

understanding of what affects the student outside school (Cushman 2003, pp.3, 12-13). Questionnaires are also a useful tool to find out a student's academic interests, learning styles, and difficulties. This information can be useful for teachers to connect coursework to developing students' interests and abilities, which can increase motivation (Cushman 2003, p.13). Answers to a questionnaire might also provide insights for a teacher to prevent or address disruptive classroom behavior; learning about the student's life outside school might help the teacher connect with that student (Cushman 2003, p.46).

Getting to know students is an integral part of creating a caring classroom, which has positive effects on student learning. Gay suggests that the concern teachers demonstrate for students' emotional, physical, economic, and interpersonal well-being results in an increase in student participation and achievement (Gay 2000, p.47). Questionnaires are a way for teachers to show that they care about students as individuals; in Cushman's study, a student named Tiffany commented, "That was the first time a teacher seemed to actually care about how a student learns, so that she could meet their needs. It made me think about how I learned -- I never thought about it before, because I'd never been asked (Cushman 2003, p.5)."

Studies show that secondary classrooms are characterized by teacher-student relationships that are less personal and positive than those in elementary school (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, and Iver 1993, p.93). These schools fail to meet the students' basic psychological need for "relatedness," or sense of connection and belonging, according to self-determination theory; loss of relatedness is a cause for concern for adolescents' development and well-being (LaGuardia and Ryan, p.195, 211-212). It is my hope that this questionnaire will help me find ways in which I can relate to and connect with students. If I am successful, I will learn and remember what is important to each of the students and have positive, constructive interactions with them during class which will help them learn.

Part Two: Learning the Students' Names

My strategy for learning each of the students' names in the first week will begin with the questionnaire (see Appendix) and a copy of the seating chart. The questionnaire will provide students' names as well as other important information to connect the names to, and the seating chart will help me determine which student filled out the questionnaire. The second part of my strategy is to learn the students' names through interaction. Before class, I will stand in the entrance to the classroom and greet each student by name as he or she enters. Each time I go to a student's desk to help answer questions, I will call the student by name if appropriate. Interaction during classroom activities is also important for information-gathering if students choose not to participate in the questionnaire; I will be able to use that opportunity to ask students questions about who they are as students and as people. Employing multiple strategies, using a combination of learning names on paper and through interpersonal interaction, will help me learn the names of the students within the first week.

Rationale:

Students expect teachers to “start out on the right foot,” and come to class prepared to do their part to help students learn and to meet their needs (Cushman 2003, 37.) Teachers are responsible for establishing norms and setting the tone for classroom interactions, which can begin with learning the students' names. The questionnaire and seating chart will provide an opportunity for me to become prepared to help them learn. I will not only know their names, but I will be able to connect personal interests and talents to their names, and demonstrate through interaction that I care who they are as students and as people (Gay 2000, p. 45).

In a recent class discussion, we talked about strategies teachers use to connect with students, one of which was to stand out in the hallway and greet students by their names as they arrive. Not only will this help me learn and

remember names, but it also will ensure that I interact with *every* student each day. According to Gay (2000, p.49), students feel a need for personal connections with teachers, which begin when teachers acknowledge their presence and make them feel valued and important. Continuing to address students by name during classroom interaction further cements this idea. This strategy will be successful if, within the first week, I can greet each of them by name before class, and if I can remember their names and some of my experiences interacting with them after the three-week period.

Part Three: Teacher-Student Interactions

To keep track of my interactions with the students, I will keep an "Interaction Journal" (see Appendix). This will take the form of a series of seating charts, one copy for each day of my field experience. On the chart, I will record information from every time I interact with each student. This information might include any specific notes about the interaction, and whether or not the interaction was positive or resulted in a positive outcome. I will use a list of possible positive and negative interactions as criteria for which to categorize my interactions. At the end of the three-week field experience, a data pattern could emerge in the journal; I will review the daily seating chart entries and possibly create a chart, graph, list, or other written or visual aid to compile the results and look for trends in the data. Along the journey, this journal will be a useful tool for tracking which students I interact with to ensure that I give equal opportunities for positive interactions with all of the students.

Rationale:

Teacher-student interactions can positively or negatively affect students' school experience, and possibly affect their lives outside school. It is vitally important for teachers to develop positive, open communication with their students. According to Cushman (2003, p. 25-33), students want teachers to communicate expectations, push them equally to do their best, make sure everyone understands, grade fairly, keep biases out of the classroom, and listen to what they think. If a teacher sets an example of fairness, trust, and respect through their interactions, students will respond positively (Cushman 2003, p.17-18). However, negative feedback, stereotypes, and biases have a negative impact on students. Students can tell if the teacher does not like them, which can negatively affect student learning (Cushman 2003, p.22).

When teachers favor some students over others, they are creating disparities in academic opportunities for students. According to Gay (2000, pp.

53-54), these disparities have little to do with intellectual capacity, and are often based on race, gender, attractiveness, social class, or culture. Students of color are called on less frequently and criticized more often, for instance (Gay 2000, p.63). In addition, all students desire an increase in opportunity for participation in the classroom as they enter secondary school, but this need for the students' development is often not met (Eccles et al. 1993, p. 99). The Interaction Journal will record my daily interactions with students, and it will be equally powerful to look at who I am *not* calling on or paying attention to so that I become conscious of my own pattern of interaction. With this information, I may improve the quality of my interactions and provide equal opportunities for students in my classroom.

Cushman (2003, pp.28-29) provides a model of a self-assessment in which a teacher can list likes and dislikes, and positive and negative interactions with their students in order to reflect on whether he or she is, in fact, either playing "favorites" or singling out students in a negative fashion. My Interaction Journal will provide me with an opportunity to assess my own interactions with students in a similar way, only on a daily basis so I can look for a general pattern of interactions. This journal strategy will be successful if I consistently record my interactions with students each day, and use a specific set of criteria to assess my interactions so that the data patterns are meaningful. Cushman (2003, p.29) outlines some examples of positive interactions, including asking a student for his or her thoughts, and negative interactions, such as using sarcasm, from which I can build my own list of criteria (see Appendix).

Sources

- Cushman, K. etc al. (2003). Fires in the bathroom. New York: New Press.
- Eccles, J.S., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Buchanan, C.M., Reuman, D., Flanagan, C., & Maclver, D. (1993) The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents' experience in schools and in families. American Psychologist, 48, 90-101.
- Gay, G. (2000). The power of caring. In Culturally responsible teaching: Theory, research, and practice (pp. 45-76). New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University.
- LaGuardia, J.G., & Ryan, R.M. (2002). What adolescents need. In F. Pajares & T. Urdan (Eds.), Academic motivation of adolescents. (pp. 193-196, 207-213). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing

Appendix: Materials for Relational Pedagogy Project

Student Questionnaire

About You:

Name (First, Last) _____

Name you like to be called _____ Age _____

Do you have any brothers or sisters? _____

Do you have any pets? (Types, Names) _____

What language(s) do you speak at home? _____

Name at least three words that describe you: (for example: funny, smart, shy....)

Your Interests:

What are your hobbies/interests/talents? _____

Favorite after-school or weekend activities? _____

Favorite movie? _____ Favorite book? _____

What are your plans for after high school? _____

What do you hope to be doing in 10 years? _____

Your Learning:

Do you like studying history? Why or why not? _____

What would you like to learn about history? _____

Do you have a favorite person, event, or time period you have learned about in any history class? _____

Describe how you learn things best. _____

How do you feel about working in groups? _____

What strengths do you bring to this class ? _____

What academic skills would you like to improve? _____

Is there anything I can help you with in this class? _____

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Interaction Journal

This is a list of possible interactions a teacher might have with students, which may be revised during field experience. A plus (+) will be recorded on the seating chart for each positive interaction, and a minus (-) will be recorded for each negative interaction. The space will be left blank if there is no interaction with the student. An "Abs" will be recorded in the space for each student who is absent.

Criteria for Interactions:

Positive:

- encouraged a student
- asked a student how they were doing
- asked a student about their thoughts
- acknowledged good work or contribution
- responded to a student's concern
- responded to a question that helped a student learn
- called on a student
- approached a student to offer help
- greeted the student outside the door
- remembered the student's name when greeting him or her

Negative:

- (blank) no interaction with the student that day.
- negative facial expression
- used sarcasm
- criticized the student
- responded to a question in a way that didn't help student learning
- ignored/didn't call on the student when they had their hand raised
- negatively reacted to a student's choices in clothing, posture, etc.

Interaction Journal - Sample Student Seating Chart

Date _____

Student Name ++++ - - -

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