

## **Relational Pedagogy Project Part II**

### **Setting for Relational Pedagogy Plan**

For three weeks, I observed and taught in a suburban four-year high school. According to my cooperating teacher, the school has a mix of lower-income, working class, and middle-class students. This high school received a grant to implement a “small schools” program in which the school is divided up into five, independently-functioning, themed small schools which students attend all four years. All five schools offer rigorous college preparatory courses as well as high school graduation requirements and vocational classes, so the differences between the schools are in the electives offered; the school in which I taught was an art-themed school where students may take studio art, photography, interior design, film, or culinary arts. Other schools are focused on performing arts, technology, and other areas.

The school in which I taught attracts a variety of students, some of which are college-bound, according to my cooperating teacher. I taught in a ninth-grade world history class in this school at the beginning of second semester, as they were beginning a unit on European history. Students in this class were of a variety of different backgrounds and ability levels, as opposed to a “tracked” or “grouped” class. This was part of a year-long history course; all of the students in this class have the same teachers for other core subjects such as English within the small school. Over a three-week period, I implemented the three parts of my Relational Pedagogy Plan in this class to try to get to know these students.

## **Review and Analysis of Relational Pedagogy Plan**

### **Part One: Learning about the Students**

The second day of my field experience, I explained to the students that I wanted to get to know them and distributed a questionnaire. Every student that was in class that day participated in the questionnaire; I gave the questionnaire to students that were absent the next day. The next day, I presented a few questionnaire results I had compiled on a PowerPoint presentation, which included activities, interests, and other information about the class as a whole (not including any personal information) that I felt would be fun and interesting to share with the class. The final slide had some facts about me, including some points about my personal and professional background and interests. Students raised their hands with questions, showing an interest in my presentation, and they applauded at the end. In the next few days, as I continued to interact with students, they became much more responsive in our interactions, making eye contact and even initiating interactions in some cases. One student even introduced me to her friends in the hallway.

According to Cushman (2003, p.4), "Giving out a questionnaire on the first day of a new class shows that the teacher cares about their strengths, interests, backgrounds, and concerns about the subject area of the class." Through these questionnaires, I was able to find out much of this information about my students, and also show that I care about them. Sharing information about my interests and professional background with the class also helped me connect and establish trust with the students, as the students are interested in what the

teacher might have to share (Cushman 2003, 15). Additional questions about the students' lives outside school such as, "Do you have a job?" or "How do you get to school?" might have provided additional insight into factors that affect students' performance in school (Cushman 2003, 6).

The relationships I developed with the students through the questionnaire process helped me motivate my students. According to La Guardia and Ryan (2002, p.207), students who have greater connections with their teacher are more likely to be more self-motivated, ask for help, and attain higher achievement. After the questionnaire and my presentation, students became more responsive toward me and began asking me questions during class. In the future, questionnaires could be useful in planning instruction because I could use the information to connect lessons to students' interests and give them a voice. If students feel they have a say in the learning process and some control in learning outcomes, they are more likely to be positively motivated (Wigfield and Wagner 2005, p. 224).

### **Part Two: Learning the Students' Names**

Learning the students' names in the first week proved to be a challenge. The teacher did not have an updated seating chart that I had planned to use, and the seating chart did not include photos of the students. The second day of my field experience, I stood outside the door and greeted each of the students on their way into the classroom, attempting to learn about them that way. Since I had introduced myself to the class the previous day, I was surprised to be met

with only a few returned acknowledgments with eye contact; most of the students either stared at the ground and mumbled “hello” or looked straight ahead and said nothing. According to stage environment-fit theory, secondary schools often do not meet the developmental needs of adolescents; after students transition to junior high, their relationships with teachers begin to deteriorate (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, and Iver 1993, pp. 92, 95). The students’ initial reactions made it clear that steps needed to be taken to improve the quality of teacher-student relationships. The first step to meeting the students’ psychological need of relatedness, or connection and belonging (La Guardia and Ryan 2002, 195), was for me to find other ways to learn their names.

I adapted by closely observing the class, and collecting the students’ questionnaires personally, acknowledging each student by name as they handed it in. Later that week, a new seating chart was assigned, and I continued to learn their names by studying the seating chart. These strategies helped me learn the names of every student towards the beginning the second week. In my future teaching experiences, I need to take additional steps to make sure I know all of the students’ names as soon as possible, perhaps organizing a seating chart with students’ file photos on the first day, taking additional steps to encourage student participation, or utilizing an “icebreaker” game or activity.

Overall, learning the students’ names, greeting them as they enter the room, and asking them how they are doing was a successful strategy in developing personal connections with them. According to Gay (2000, p. 47),

teachers create a personal connections with students by acknowledging their presence, honoring their intellect, respecting them, and making them feel important. As I continued to interact more with the students each day and call them by name, increasing numbers of students began to respond with acknowledgment, eye contact, and sometimes would even initiate interactions and ask me how I was doing. According to Cushman (2003, p.103), a teacher with a passion for the material and who cares about the students can have a highly positive effect on student motivation. The same students who had stared at the ground and mumbled on my first attempt at a greeting were becoming receptive and responsive toward me, which was evident in their increased participation level in classroom activities.

### **Part Three: Teacher-Student Interactions**

Each day, my cooperating teacher and I recorded my interactions with the students in my Interaction Journal; my cooperating teacher recorded most of the interactions. It soon became clear that analyzing each interaction and then assigning a “positive” or “negative” value to them in the Interaction Journal, as originally intended in my plan, was not feasible due to time constraints; instead, the Interaction Journal ended up being more of a checklist which recorded each time I greeted a student by name, called on them in a discussion, or helped them with their work. In addition, only some of the interactions were recorded; in class activities in which I was constantly interacting with students, or if the cooperating teacher was busy, record-keeping was difficult.

However, useful data was collected within these constraints. After several days of recording interactions, a pattern began to emerge; there were students whose names I could consistently remember, who I called on more frequently, and who I helped more often. These students were not simply more academically engaged than others, but they were also the most socially outgoing students in the class, many of which belonged to the largest, most visible peer group I observed within the small school. According to Eder (1995, p.31), certain groups of students have higher social status than others, and those with higher status are the most visible students. Gay (2000, p.53) writes, "Students who are perceived positively are advantaged in instructional interactions." In this class, these students were often willing to raise their hands, volunteer to be called on, or ask questions. They were also more likely to make eye contact and acknowledge me as I greeted them before class, and more likely to initiate an interaction. These students got the most attention for me and the cooperating teacher.

The Interaction Journal also proved useful in identifying who I was *not* interacting with on a daily basis. According to Cushman (2003, p. 83), teenagers are often sensitive or afraid of being embarrassed in front of others, of being praised or criticized in front of the class. There were a number of students in the class who consistently did not volunteer, raise their hands, or ask questions. At the secondary level, students are increasingly subjected to higher standards in judging competence and performance, as well as higher levels of social comparison and public evaluation (Eccles et al. 1993, pp.93-94). Students with

concerns about being publicly evaluated may abstain from classroom activities, and as a result, my relationship with them fails to develop or diminishes, putting these students at a disadvantage. Gay (2000, p.53) writes, “Those who are viewed negatively or skeptically are disadvantaged, often to the extent of total exclusion from participation in substantive academic interactions.”

The challenge was to find ways to interact with and engage these students, which proved difficult in some classroom activities. According to Cushman (2003, p.189), public schools’ goals of efficiency and order result in “large, factorylike high schools that stifle the opportunity for genuine relationships among students and teachers, or for imaginative classroom practices.”

Information in this class was often given in a lecture format to quickly and efficiently cover content, but left little room for interaction. The practice of calling on students only when they raise their hands did not allow some students, those unlikely to volunteer, to express themselves.

According to Eccles (et al., 1993, p. 94), students need a safe and intellectually challenging learning environment to adapt to their developmental needs, which offers all students opportunities for growth. The cooperating teacher and I discussed and modeled strategies to attempt to create a “safe” environment, such as having students discuss ideas in pairs and write them down, with an option to share with the class. Students responded positively to this strategy, expressing thoughtful and meaningful ideas in their pairs; this provided an outlet for students to fully develop their ideas and express themselves who perhaps preferred not to do so in front of a large group, while

the teacher and I were able to assess their participation by listening to their discussions. Continuing to keep an Interaction Journal, and perhaps adding a section for comments, could help me continue to search for and implement strategies to engage every student, and assess how well these strategies work by analyzing patterns of interaction.



## Sources

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