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Goals and Teaching English Language Classes

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My favorite course to teach is the first course I developed in 1996 called "Language Use in the African American Community." For fall semester 2000, I chose to teach the course in a different way than I had before. I decided more tangibly to practice what I preach by implementing what I often say about teaching and learning. To that end, I will discuss my experiences with a teaching strategy that used what I know about self-regulation, goals, and students' intellectual development in a novel way for me. I will also discuss the surprises I encountered when teaching a class that dealt with language and race. In sharing my teaching and learning experiences, I hope to demonstrate the importance of self-set goals, the gifts students bring to the classroom, and all the things one cannot take for granted as a teacher.

Without a Vision (a.k.a. Goal), the People Perish

I often tell my students who are doing research projects that they should not only choose a project that will sustain their interest but also go into a project with a definable research question. Their first job, then, is to articulate what they want to do in the form of a question. Next, they are to decide how best to answer that question. In doing this, they will develop a topic of interest and not commit themselves to a particular method or methodology just because it sounds interesting or because that's the way everyone does it. This has tended to be good advice and advice I try to follow in my own research. As such, I thought the same type of process would work for designing and teaching a class. For example, although most college courses have a catalog description that tells students what the course is generally about, the description tends to be broad and not necessarily useful. So, I decided that I needed to develop goals for the course as part of the catalog description. I needed to make goals explicit for the course to start the process of facilitating goal development for my students.

Lanehart and Schutz (2001, 84) discuss three steps that can be used to begin this process of facilitating goal development for self-regulated learning:

First, create activities that provide students the opportunity to develop their skills at setting “useful” goals.¹ . . . The second step is to provide the opportunity for training in the strategies the students will need to reach their goals.² . . . The third step . . . is to create activities that provide the opportunity for students to make connections between the course content and their goals.³

Students need to start with “useful” goals, and there are several characteristics of “useful” goals that have been shown to be effective. Goals tend to be the most useful when they are challenging yet realistic. When goals are too easy, we tend to lose interest; when they are too difficult, they can soon become overwhelming (Lanehart and Schutz 2001, 85). For example, I often require students to do a concept map.⁴ In concept mapping, students use higher order-level thinking skills to interrelate important concepts from the course. Students often find this to be a daunting task at first—and it is. What makes concept mapping challenging yet realistic is the amount of scaffolding provided by the instructor. By giving students opportunities to practice the skills they will need, instructors can help them develop confidence in their ability to complete this “daunting” task. In the end, instructors get a very good idea of how well the students understand the concepts in the course and how well they have mastered the skills necessary to interrelate concepts—skills that can be useful regardless of discipline or endeavor.

Goals that are specific and measurable tend to be more useful than goals that are general. Specific and measurable goals are important because during the process of working toward a goal, students need feedback to regulate and monitor their progress. If a goal is general, it is hard to tell where one is in relationship to where one wants to be. For example, though wanting to do well in “American English” may be admirable, it is not a specific goal. What does “doing well” mean? A more specific goal would be to do the readings before class and review the readings after discussing them in class.

Commitment to the goal is important. If there is little or no commitment, little progress toward a goal can be expected. One way to help students develop the commitment to a goal is for students to take ownership by setting the goal themselves. Self-set goals can be more useful because they are the result of the person’s own effort and, therefore, may have more meaning to the person. If someone else is setting goals for the student, there is no guarantee the student will take ownership of the goal(s).

Goals that are more proximal or short-term are more likely to be accomplished than goals that are distant. Thus, for longer-term goals, students need to learn how to break the task into smaller parts and set their own specific, challenging, proximal goals. For example, if a student wants to get an “A” in “Language Variation,” then knowledge about the steps necessary to get an A is important. If getting an A entails

completing and turning in all required assignments with distinction, then the student knows that doing so is a necessary step toward the goal of getting an A.

Keeping all that in mind, I wrote the following “Course Description and Objectives” on my syllabuses for my fall 2000 classes:

Answers to two primary questions will guide this course: “What is African American English (AAE)?” and “Why is studying the language of American Slave Descendants important?” To answer these questions, we will survey, examine, and discuss scholarly (i.e., theoretical, research, and critical) texts and primary source materials that bear on language use in the sociocultural, ecological, and sociohistorical contexts of American Slave Descendants and the implications of those contexts for African Americans in particular and society in general. I expect you to critically think about texts and class discussions in order to analyze, synthesize, and build texts—including your own. The course will focus on theory-based and research-oriented information as well as critical essays that will provide you with knowledge to have an intelligent and informed discussion about language use in the African American community.

On the first day of class, I tend to ask my students to write down why they are taking the course and their expectations.⁵ Most of the responses jibed with the goals I set for the course: most students wanted to know more about the history of language use in the African American community and why African Americans use the language they do. So, I naively assumed our goals were all in one accord.

Without the Same Vision . . .

Whenever I teach a course, I want my students to see my interest in it and its importance. I am generally excited about teaching because I love language, and I want my students to learn to love it as well and to see its importance. However, something I included on my syllabus when I taught the same classes fall 1998 might have been beneficial for the fall 2000 classes. I actually explicitly, verbally and in writing, articulated for them what I think self-regulation means:

To succeed in this course, you will need an open and inquiring mind, critical thinking skills, good listening and writing skills, effective learning and study strategies, good time management skills, interest in cooperative learning, and interest in student-centered learning. In essence, you will need to be a self-regulated learner. (Self-regulated learning is a multidimensional skill that is exemplified by students who are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning. In other words, self-

regulated learners are active controlling participants who direct what they learn and how they go about learning.)

I made the mistake of not doing the same for the fall 2000 undergraduate class. Though I often told students they needed to be critical in their readings, the undergraduate students were rarely critical thinkers; the graduate students, however, were often very critical. There was one notable difference between the undergraduate and graduate classes that I believe contributed to the difference in success. In the graduate class, students had the following weekly assignment:

Our class sessions will center on discussion of weekly readings. You are to prepare a 1-page, typed, single-spaced commentary (i.e., 300-500 words) on the assigned materials and e-mail it to me by 9:00AM on Mondays as noted. I will read the commentaries to structure class discussions for the week. The final weekly commentary will be comprehensive and 500 words. Your commentaries might address the following issues:

- Points of clarification of issues that appear ambiguous.
- Specification of directions in which certain topics could be elaborated.
- Points of contention. Conceptual or empirical issues that we can debate in class.
- Empirical findings that are relevant to issues raised in the readings.
- New application of knowledge to personal, social, or educational change.
- Discussion of research that you have underway or plan to conduct on language use in the African American community.

The undergraduates had the following assignment, which was meant to be comparable to the above graduate assignment but not as much writing for the undergraduates:

You are to e-mail me by 9:00AM 1-3 questions you have about the readings for that week.

Little did I know how incomparable the two assignments were. It took me about five weeks of receiving mostly trivial questions to realize the assignment was not working, whereas it did not take long at all to realize that the papers from the graduate class were going well. In the end, the graduate students believed the weekly commentaries were one of the most beneficial assignments for the course given the goals and expectations we shared. For some reason, the undergraduate class was unwilling to engage in critical, reflective thought for the readings and topic we were addressing.

After doing midterm course evaluations, I had hoped I could determine what the problem was.⁶ There *seemed* to be little in the feedback useful for changing the direction of the course except that most students felt the coursepack readings were too difficult, and they wanted to read more of John Rickford and Russell Rickford's (2000) *Spoken Soul* and comparable readings. They also noted that I should not have assigned readings that contradicted one another. (Many of these students believed there was one right answer to any question. Hence, their simplistic epistemological beliefs did not allow for disagreement among authorities, especially for the complex topic we were addressing.) I still did not understand the significance of this, especially since the midterm exam was graded, and it was obvious that most of the students could not even adequately respond to what they surely should have known would be one question on the exam—"What is AAE?" I failed to realize that even noted scholars have a difficult time answering that very question, so I should not have been surprised when college juniors and seniors had a difficult time engaging that question after a few weeks of classes—especially when it wasn't *their* goal.

For all my work in designing a course that considered goals, I had forgotten an important modifier for making the course successful: self-set. As I stated earlier about goal commitment, "Self-set goals can be more useful because they are the result of the person's own effort and, therefore, may have more meaning to the person. *If someone else is setting goals for the student, there is no guarantee the student will take ownership of the goal(s).*" And they didn't.

Another mistake I made is that I did not have the students indicate the level of importance of the goals to them by rank-ordering them. So, even though defining AAE may have been of some interest to them, it was not important enough to them to spend the first half of the semester reading multiple and divergent texts about the definition and history of AAE. Frankly, I don't think they knew what they were getting into because they did not know what defining AAE involved. Not knowing enough about the task contributed to their frustration about and loss of interest in what originally was at least a moderate goal.

Goal Reconciliation

Once the students finally expressed their specific, self-set goals, we were able to make significant changes to the course to make the few remaining weeks of it more enjoyable but still a learning experience. The students overwhelmingly chose to do a group instruction project/presentation (something I have never supported, encouraged, or suggested) and a linguistic autobiographical essay instead of the bibliographic essay assignment.⁷ I felt it was important for them to do something at which they could be more successful since they had already suffered blows to their confidence in their abilities as students with the midterm exam. Although they had a

sociolinguistic interview assignment, on which they performed adequately, that was not enough.⁸ So, I dumped the bibliographic essay and let them take over much of the last few weeks of the semester by doing group instruction projects/presentations based on Rickford and Rickford's (2000) *Spoken Soul* (Part 2: "This Passion, This Skill, This Incredible Music"), which included chapters 2 ("Writers"), 3 ("Preachers and Pray-ers"), 4 ("Comedians and Actors," which they divided into two groups), and 5 ("Singers, Toasters, and Rappers"). They self-selected their topics, they enjoyed doing their presentations, and they put a lot of time into their presentations because it was what they most wanted to do—and they did them very well. They were some of the best group presentations I have seen. They were learning experiences for all of us because I found that my undergraduate students could critically think and engage texts and that critical thinking coincided with their goal setting. Imagine that.

In the end, I realized more clearly where I had gone wrong. I think the approach I took to designing the course was a good approach and one I still recommend and will use from now on. However, I realize that I failed to fully implement my knowledge about teaching and learning. I believe you have to take into consideration the goals of your students every time you teach (e.g., self-set, rank-ordered goals) and, as such, I should have started with culture given their preferences instead of critical texts. I also believe you have to scaffold and model the learning you think needs to occur as well as clearly articulate the learning you expect to occur (e.g., help students move from their epistemologically simplistic to epistemologically mature beliefs through reflection and peer interaction). I likewise believe that you have to provide students the practice in that learning in safe environments (e.g., the ability to revise written assignments) for when they will need to do it in challenging environments (e.g., tests). Ultimately, you have to start/know where your students are (e.g., pretests) and bring them forth from there (e.g., be flexible enough to change).

Surprise, Surprise: Language and Race in a Class about Language and Race

I set out to tell you about this novel approach to teaching English language classes. It just so happens I was teaching an English language class where language and race are at the fore and I am African American. I am (one of) the only African American teacher many of my students will have. My class is (one of) the only class where the students will have multiple African American student peers. It is a different experience for many of them, from environment to subject matter. Given that, I usually begin each "Language Use in the African American Community" course with a small section on language and attitudes. Nevertheless, there was one thing going on this particular semester that I never imagined to the extent that it occurred, never dreamed of in the way that it manifested itself.

As I mentioned earlier, my students wrote a sociolinguistic interview essay. One of the students interviewed a university professor for the assignment. In response to a question about whether she uses AAE in the classroom since she teaches a subject that deals with African Americans and their relationship to others, the professor responded that she did not use AAE in the classroom much because when she has, some students believe she is not intelligent, and many times (black) students believe she will be an easy teacher because the barrier of respect and authority is no longer there.

I read something similar to that sentiment in an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by Nell Irvin Painter (2000), entitled “Black Studies, Black Professors, and the Struggles of Perception.” In the article, Painter describes how she was stunned “when a student journalist at Princeton asked [her] whether [she] had a Ph.D.” (B8). She also quotes Patricia Hill-Collins, who quotes a black woman who observed, “Now to white people your colored person is always a stranger. Not only that, we are supposed to be dumb strangers, so we can’t tell them anything?” (B8). Painter writes a little more of my story from fall 2000 when she adds that “the widespread assumption that black people are not intellectual affects everyone in higher education who is black or who does black studies” (B7). Painter, through her collage of voices, tells a story for me that I did not expect needed to be told in fall 2000—but she spoke the truth as I lived it and she told it well.

Fall 2000 was the first time my students or I had a class that was overwhelmingly black. Of the twenty-two students in the class, fourteen were black. The black students truly felt they owned the class, and the other students believed it too. Neither group had ever been in that position in college. That may be, in part, why the undergraduate students responded in the way they did about the course. One of the black students I spoke with did not realize there was actually scholarly content for a class on language use in the African American community. This went beyond the idea that because she was black, she knew everything there was to know about black language. This was about the very thing Painter and Hill-Collins articulated (Painter 2000): the validity of studying black people even though one is never questioned about studying white people. What makes one more scholarly than the other? This student devalued her own experience, her own life.

Fortunately, in the end, most complimented my knowledge in the field and acknowledged that there was legitimately such a field (and, to be honest, I think they could say that because of the struggles we went through in the beginning with the rigorous texts they were “made” to read)—but, surprisingly, that is not where they were in the beginning of a course they voluntarily enrolled in. It made me wonder why students even enroll in a course addressing AAE. Some do not believe there is such a thing. Some of my first days are spent addressing the Ebonics controversy and misinformation. Some do not even want to legitimize what they speak by even giving it a name. They just want to call it slang—if even that. I have to convince the

people who voluntarily registered for my course that it is a valid course and that I really do have a Ph.D. in a valid field of inquiry. I am now cognizant that in a course that deals with language and race, I have to address language and race because it may very well be a conscious focus or on the conscience of my students. I also have to consider that when I use AAE in the class, and I will (although most students don't think I use AAE—there's usually some debate about this, though I may get points for trying), I'll have to wonder whether that will be seen as a good thing or a bad thing. Consciousness works both ways.

Conclusion

What did I learn and what will I do differently? Goals are good to have, but there needs to be some co-construction of goals when teaching a course since the teacher and students are all in it together, and it is an experience that needs to be a learning one for both. Instructors need to see and know the relevance of what they do, or they will not be doing it for long—or at least not very well. I need to be flexible and realize that my students and I can have the same goals and perhaps just not the same commitment to them. I may need to change something as simple as the order in which I do what I do so as to get what I want in the end. But, even more important, I realized that I have to better practice what I preach and I cannot control what is not in my control. I know that sounds obvious, but it was not so obvious to me before. I cannot control the often hidden assumptions students have about what I teach or who I am as a black woman, but I can certainly continue to empower myself and arm my students with the knowledge that what I do has meaning not only to me but to them as well, whether black or white, graduate or undergraduate, budding linguist or budding accountant. They will have no excuse for ignorance, and I will accept no excuse for failure—or for not learning from them every time I teach.

Notes

1. For example, at the beginning of the term, ask students about their life goals and have them develop goals for the course. For example, ask, “What would you like to accomplish in this class this term?” and “What do you see yourself doing five years from now?” The goal information collected will also help instructors to get to know their students and begin the process of developing involvement with the students. This is important because if instructors intend to relate the content of the course to their students' lives, they need to know something about their lives. One way to begin that process is by asking them about their goals.

2. For example, if their goals involve improving their writing skills, then they will need the opportunity to practice and learn the strategies and skills required to achieve those goals. This process begins with pretesting for the knowledge and

strategies important for the class and then spending class time teaching the strategies needed for the students to be successful in the class. It is the responsibility of the instructor to teach not only the content of the course but also the strategies and skills that will facilitate learning in the course. By giving a pretest early in the term, the instructor gets an idea of what each student knows about the subject matter to be discussed in the course. The students also learn what they already know about important concepts to be mastered for the course. A test on such concepts—nongraded, of course—is one way of doing this. In terms of helping students with strategies to master the material, practice in concept mapping is useful. If concept mapping (see note 4) is a required component of the course, practice using the strategies needed to be successful at concept mapping is also required. Such practice could involve breaking down the tasks necessary to complete a concept map. For example, the first task in concept mapping is to define the terms using one's own words. Students need to understand the terms before they can be expected to interrelate them. Next, students need to be able to see basic similarities and differences between the terms. Part of what makes concept mapping challenging is that there is more than one way to map the terms. The map itself unfolds in the same way the student's knowledge of the terms unfolds. In other words, since we all see things differently even though we may share starting points, our differences provide unique ways of seeing the same things. Hence, expect differences, but also expect the students' surreality.

3. One way to accomplish this is by tying the goals students set to the information collected during pretesting about their skills. By helping them set goals that deal with the weaknesses they identified during the pretesting, they can make connections between their goals and the content of the course. For example, in English language classrooms, students often have a goal and/or expectation of improving their language and writing skills. By doing a usage survey, students learn about course content (i.e., history of English usage and the misconceptions that accompany that history) and meet one of their goals (i.e., learning about language use to help with their speaking and writing). This activity also provides an opportunity for the instructor to teach students where to find information (e.g., a history of the English language textbook) and how to analyze and use such informational resources now and in the future.

4. In the last concept map assignment I gave, I had the following instructions for my "Introduction to English Language" course:

- (1) Your task is to interrelate some of the concepts we have discussed this semester in "Introduction to English Language." *In 2-3 paragraphs, describe your situation, explain your rationale, "tell your story" for what, in essence, best reflects your interest, learning, understanding, and knowledge of "Eng-*

lish Language” this semester. (2) Use (English) ‘LANGUAGE’ as the concept most important to understanding the course and richest in conceptual connections. Think about the topic, (English) LANGUAGE, then write down 10 additional concepts or terms relating to (English) LANGUAGE in the spaces provided below. Choose terms that have been of interest to you and have helped you to understand the course material. *Define all 20 concepts* (i.e., the 10 below + your 10) *IN YOUR OWN WORDS—NOT the book’s or the dictionaries’ or the class’s or the Internet’s, etc.* (3) *Describe a unique example* (one *NOT* used in class or the readings but of your own creation based on your understanding) for each of the 20 concepts and list the reading and page number(s) where the concept came from for your 10 concepts only. (4) Identify ways the terms and concepts are associated with each other. *Diagram how the 20 concepts are interrelated* based on your interest and understanding of the course material. Your diagram should fit on a sheet of paper or poster board between 8.5" × 11" (or that can be folded to that size). *Label your associations* on whatever you use to connect concepts (e.g., if you have a line drawn between concepts, indicate the nature and direction(s) of the relationship). N.B.: When doing your concept map, continue to use the particular situation you created to relate the concepts as they might occur in that situation.

5. Three questions I ask are as follows:

(1) Please explain why you are taking “Language Use in the African American Community” and how you heard about the course. (2) Please briefly explain what you expect “Language Use in the African American Community” to be about. In other words, what do you expect to learn about and what do you want to learn about? Please explain. and (3) What would you personally like to accomplish in *this class* this semester?

6. For every course and every level I teach, I always do a midterm course evaluation that consists of four questions: “What has Dr. Lanehart done that has been helpful in promoting learning and understanding in this class?” “What could Dr. Lanehart do differently to promote learning and understanding in this class?” “What have you done that has been helpful in promoting your own learning and understanding in this class?” and “What could you do differently to help promote your own learning and understanding in this class?”

7. The group instruction project/presentation involved ethnically and gender-balanced small groups of four to five students who led a twenty-minute presentation for class based on chapters 2 through 5 from Rickford and Rickford’s *Spoken Soul* (2000) and two articles or book chapters not assigned for class. The presentation needed to use concepts and material from throughout the semester and needed to have some significance and impact on language use in the African American

community. Groups could use handouts, slides, posters, transparencies, videotapes, and other audiovisual materials to instruct the class via a performance or a traditional class presentation.

The linguistic autobiographical essay was a five- to seven-page essay that centered on the following question: "How am I different now because of this class (i.e., the readings, class discussions, materials, etc.) given where I was in my life and my prior linguistic experiences at the beginning of the semester?"

The bibliographic essay was to be a seven- to ten-page literature review of twelve to fifteen sources that also included an annotated bibliography of the literature critiqued.

8. The sociolinguistic interview essay was an eight- to ten-page essay of an in-depth, transcribed interview with one participant analyzing the participants' attitudes toward their own fluency in African American English (AAE) and a language of wider communication (LWC), which one they learned first, how they learned the second as well as how those circumstances affected their feelings about second-dialect learning and teaching, family retention of the home dialect, and the politics of bidialectalism. Each participant had to be an African American adult or adolescent and a speaker of both AAE and a LWC.

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