

CTLT's Spring Semester 2006 Teaching Tip for April 20

As we enter the last few weeks of the semester, the Center wanted to provide some food for thought on three aspects of aspiring to become a more effective teacher called “The 3 Rs Toward Effective Teaching.” Today is the first installment, or first “R”, on risk. The others will follow over the next 2 weeks as we finish Spring Semester 2006.

The 3 Rs Toward Effective Teaching: Risks, Reflection and Renewal

As an educator, a fundamental role that we must take on is that of learner. We must constantly strive to learn what works best for our students, what doesn't and where to go to learn more because, as you know, all aspects of teaching and learning are constantly changing – the tools, the students, the knowledge base or content, and even ourselves. Accomplishing this goal of perpetual improvement toward effective teaching requires the consideration of a different set of “3 Rs” – risk, reflection and renewal.

RISK

David Kreiner's essay, “Taking Risks as a Teacher”

(<http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/eit/eit2000/eit00-20.html>)

describes a variety of risks one can take as an educator, including: not lecturing, trusting students, being funny, class activities, using technology, and not having fun. For some, these may not seem like risks, but for anyone not used to doing it or not “a natural” at it, they can be great risks.

In addition to the list provided by Kreiner, perhaps one more risk can be added: “The Risk of Opening our Classroom.” Whether done in an informal manner (i.e., peer coaching, mentorship) or something more formal like a planned peer observation session, a great deal can be learned if coupled with introspective thinking and reflection.

For those of you who may be wary of another person observing your teaching or syllabus, consider this: Larry Keig and Michael D. Waggoner comment that “having classes observed and materials assessed by colleagues for the purpose of instructional improvement no more should be considered a threat to academic freedom than would having colleagues critique a proposed manuscript for publication.” (from <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/94-2dig.htm>)

Characteristics of an Effective Observer

Below is a list of characteristics provided by department faculty members at UNC-Chapel Hill who were asked to describe the qualities of an effective observer. From <http://ctl.unc.edu/fyc15.html> - "These characteristics consistently appear in the literature on peer observation, and successful programs emphasize the necessity of keeping them constantly in mind when visiting classes. The basic task of a peer observer is to ascertain if the method being used seems to be effective, not whether it conforms to notions of teaching derived solely from personal experience. There are many ways to be effective."

1. Has sensitivity; empathizes with the person being observed
2. Sees improvement as the primary objective of the evaluation process
3. Is an experienced teacher
4. Is a good listener
5. Gives specific, constructive feedback and advice
6. Has integrity; takes the process seriously; prepares for the observations
7. Sees different styles of teaching as valid and acceptable
8. Is not doctrinaire about teaching methods

It's interesting to note that extensive discipline-specific content knowledge is not mentioned. Depending on the type of feedback one may want, this could be a critical characteristic, but it's not necessarily essential when identifying and suggesting effective teaching strategies.

For more information on peer observation or peer coaching, here are some resources to consult an individual or a department:

Preparing for Peer Observation (U. of Texas)

<http://www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/PeerObserve.html>

Classroom Observation Worksheet

(from "A Guide for Evaluating Teaching for Promotion and Tenure", by Centra, Froh, Gray, & Lambert)

<http://www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/ClassWorksheet.pdf>

This extensive observation worksheet can be utilized two ways – during a formal evaluation by a peer or as a reflective analysis tool to examine your own teaching (completed either right after a class or while watching a video of your lesson).

Classroom Observation Form (PDF)

A one page 5-point Likert scale from excellent to poor from Hampton University, VA

http://www.hamptonu.edu/onlineresources/forms/faculty/Classroom_Observation.pdf