ABSTRACT

This paper shares my excitement of the classroom, respect for the students, and the joy found in the classroom. I present principles that I believe make the classroom a magical place. Maintaining the presence of the moment through these principles and your individual teaching style will enhance your students learning.

Key Words:
Present Moment, Student Engagement, Teaching Effectiveness

I absolutely love teaching. The smell and feel of the classroom, the sights and sounds of the students, and the tastes of success and failure mingle together creating a magical place for me. It is this passion that I hope to communicate with this paper. I want you to share my excitement of the classroom, my respect for the students, and the joy that I find in each classroom moment.

But there is another aspect that I want to share with you as well. I have discovered three guiding principles that when used effectively allow a classroom to blossom into the magical place mentioned above. The principles are very simple, yet extremely powerful in terms of allowing the learning process to flow. They are: get present, make contact, and challenge participation (Wheeler, 2012; Wheeler & Schalk, 2011). Hence, the paper’s core message, discussing these principles and their impact on teaching effectiveness, sprung out of my own teaching experience.

These principles may also help us address some very real issues, such as reduced budgets and increased competition, that are facing today’s teachers. The effectiveness of teachers has always been an important concern. Now, however, with free on-line classes and shrinking university budgets, teacher effectiveness is becoming an even larger issue. Why should students come to class when they can get similar material from the comfort of their living room at no cost? And, how can we teach effectively when we are faced with dwindling resources and larger and larger classes? The resulting challenge for teachers ends up being how can we make and keep ourselves relevant with today’s students while concurrently meeting the demands of university administration? One answer may lie with these three principles.

This paper will discuss these principles and explore what they mean to us as teachers. The paper will then present preliminary findings from a pilot study focused on illustrating that these principles do in fact work. Finally, the paper will suggest next steps aimed at helping other teachers learn and use these principles.
LITERATURE REVIEW

These principles allow any learning associated with any content to be stronger and last longer. These principles lay the groundwork for the content to be taught more effectively and describe a process that parallels and upholds the teaching of content. By that, I mean the teacher can be guided by these principles while teaching content. The three principles are: get present, make contact, and challenge participation (Wheeler, 2012; Wheeler & Schalk, 2011). First, the teacher gets present in the moment and creates an environment where the students get present. Second, the teacher makes contact with the students and the students respond. Third, the teacher challenges the students to participate. It is that simple. Yet it is also extremely powerful in terms of the potential student engagement and learning. Please see Figure 1 below.

In this section each principle will be explored and the associated propositions will be presented. I chose to use propositions rather than hypotheses because this research is exploratory in nature and is not based on previous models (Cooper & Schindler, 2010). A brief review of teaching effectiveness will also be provided.
Get Present

The present moment’s impact on teaching is an unexplored area that warrants our attention. I am convinced that teaching effectiveness requires the present moment. At least one other agrees: “Teaching calls on one to be present… As an educator, I have always worked hard to maintain a sense of intentional presence, a practice that mirrors that of breathing within yoga. This is a practice that requires intention and discipline, along with deep awareness of the present moment…” (MacKenzie, 2011, p. 67)

Getting present is the beginning of allowing our inner consciousness to emerge. As noted by Tolle (2006), “at the heart of the new consciousness lies the transcendence of thought, the newfound ability of rising above thought, of realizing a dimension within yourself that is infinitely more vast than thought” (pp. 21-22).

Being in the present moment means waking up to this moment. It allows us to be alert and focused. When we are present we are with energy and excitement which are more than emotional states (Jung, 1961; Prigogine, 1984; Wegela, 2009). They bring with them intense clarity where everything flows and our vibratory frequency gets excited. Under normal conditions, we are in a ‘ground state’; when we get present our energy is in an excited state (Capra, 1991) where we are able to “tap into direct experience: that is, experience that is not filtered through our thoughts, expectations, hopes, and fears…” (Wegela, 2009, p. 26).
To my knowledge, as of this writing little literature has examined the impact of teaching in the present moment. The closest concept in the literature is mindfulness which involves being fully present and focused (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer & Toney, 2006; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007). It allows people to think constructively (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 1994, 2005) as well as have greater cognitive flexibility (Feldman, Hayes, Kumar, Greeson, & Laurenceau, 2007), higher control over one’s cognitive, affective, and behavioral experiences (Astin, 1997), and higher capability to deal with challenges and difficulties (Feldman et al., 2007). Based on my own teaching experiences these findings do indeed suggest that mindfulness, similar to getting present, can improve student learning and teacher effectiveness.

The main difference between mindfulness and getting present lies in how they are done and their outcomes. Mindfulness is a contemplative cognitive function that quiets the mind using techniques such as meditation and yoga. It involves being nonjudgmental (Cardacioto, Herbert, Forman, Moitra, & Farrow, 2008). In contrast, when we are able to get present, we simply awaken to this moment. We can be as active as we choose, as long as we connect with this moment. As we get present, no judgments are made. We just are, we simply are present.

Yet, regardless of the definition used, being in the present moment allows us to be more fully here. Noted psychologist, Abraham Maslow, seems to agree when he said “I can feel guilty about the past, apprehensive about the future, but only in the present can I act” (Maslow, 2010).

Getting present means waking up to the present moment: first the teacher and then the students. The present moment allows both the teacher and the students to be alert and focused. By getting present one is aware of sensations, alert to the environment, and attentive to this moment. More
importantly, I am suggesting that getting present can have a positive impact on teacher effectiveness.

It is proposed:

*Proposition 1:* When we are present with ourselves and our students our teacher effectiveness improves.

**Make Contact**

Making contact involves connecting with ourselves first and foremost. The power of being ourselves, resting within ourselves, and making contact with ourselves has got to be one of the greatest powers that we can possess (Tolle, 2004, 2006). As teachers, making contact with ourselves underscores our responsibility to our students; we have to connect with ourselves before we can connect with anyone else.

Mother Teresa said, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other” (Mother, 2013). She knew our shared connection, yet she also recognized those times when we forget this connection. But, as this quote suggest, if we are able to extend ourselves to just one student, then we can be there for all our students.

In the literature the closest concept seems to be instructional immediacy (Rocca, 2009, 2010) or the “behavior that brings the instructor and the students closer together in terms of perceived distance” (Rocca, 2007). It can be either verbal such as “calling the students by name, using humor and encouraging student input and discussion” (Rocca, 2007) or non-verbal such as “smiling, gesturing, eye contact and having relaxed body language” (Rocca, 2007).

Yet, making contact with ourselves and the students involves so much more. The verbal and non-verbal behaviors mentioned above are important. But they are just part of what is actually happening. As we make contact with ourselves, we connect compassionately both with ourselves and with others in a playful, lighthearted, and humorous fashion from moment to moment and in a serious, forceful, and stern manner as circumstances demand. When we make contact as teachers we appreciate our students, create trust, and employ motivational teaching techniques which accelerate the learning process.

It is proposed:

*Proposition 2:* When we make contact with ourselves and our students our teacher effectiveness improves.

**Challenge Participation**

Educe, the root of the word education, means “to draw or bring out” (Educe, 2013). From this, we can conclude that our job, at least in part, is to draw out our students and help them apply relevant concepts to their lives, engage in understanding materials in a meaningful way that goes beyond memorizing theories, and move towards sustaining this learning. If we are able to meet the students where they are in terms of the classroom material, then our job involves challenging student participation until they can not only repeat the class material but embody it. We can do
this by asking unexpected questions, embracing student resistance, and remaining mentally positive.

A review of the literature was unsuccessful in finding a similar concept.

It is proposed:

Proposition 3: When we challenge participation with ourselves and our students our teacher effectiveness improves.

Teaching Effectiveness

Teaching effectiveness is a well researched topic (Allan, Clarke, & Jopling, 2009). Researchers associate a variety of factors with it including developing high order learning processes in students (Biggs, 2003), recognizing the impact that social, economic and political factors might have (Campbell, Kyriakides, Muijs, & Robinson, 2004; Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001; Mortimore, 1998), and measuring the impact teacher characteristics, teacher expectations, and the learning environment have on students’ achievement (Allan et al., 2009).

For this study teaching effectiveness is defined as the efforts that allow the students to understand the course content, practice what is being taught, and immediately apply the relevant course concepts to one’s life while the teacher makes the course interesting and stays on task.

METHODOLOGY

A preliminary inductive theory-building study focusing on how the present moment positively impacts teacher effectiveness was conducted. Gathering the perspectives of both teachers and students provided an understanding of the interplay of the experiences that influence teacher effectiveness. Theoretical perspectives of teacher effectiveness and student learning, although plentiful, lack work focusing on the impact of the present moment (MacKenzie, 2011). By building theory through the use of inductive methods this study obtained and integrated rich descriptive information and uncovered unanticipated clues.

Setting and Overview of the Research Design

The research site was a business school at a Midwest state university. Because the study aimed to gain insight into how the present moment impacts teacher effectiveness it employed both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Data Collection

Uncovering the Principles. On-going conversations regarding effective teaching led to this project. A colleague had seen me in the classroom and witnessed the excitement and energy that was generated between teacher and student. Her observations and our subsequent discussions led to my taking extensive notes regarding what I was beginning to understand as the present moment and its impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning.
As the conversation progressed we considered questions that Strauss and Corbin (1998, 69, 77) suggested: With whom is an interaction or exchange occurring or being recommended and why? Who begins or is expected to begin this interaction or exchange? What are the consequences of engaging in this process? What can our discussions tell us about the purpose or function being served? For example, we realized that by getting present the teacher creates a learning experience for the students that will not happened otherwise.

After several discussions about the intent and consequences of the present moment, we inductively categorized our ideas into three principles: Get Present, Make Contact, and Challenge Participation. We chose these labels because of their simplicity, their accurate depiction of the intent behind the actions, and the fact that the literature did not offer an acceptable taxonomy. A fourth, Desired Outcome, came after we realized its necessity.

Creating Themes and Items. Next, we focused on identifying the process through which the principles were combined, paying particular attention to when and why the principles focused on teaching and learning. Following Strauss and Corbin (1998, 163–169), we looked for sequences of interactions and sought to understand how they varied in response to changing classroom conditions. We asked ourselves questions Strauss and Corbin recommended, including: What conditions have contributed to the context in which the principles emerge as useful? What conditions or activities connect one principle to another? How do the consequences of one principle play into another principle? For example, through our discussion we realized that these principles can occur sequentially or simultaneously.

We then each formed a list of what we thought these principles meant both in theory and practice. We independently reviewed our lists to search for any new events, behaviors, or indicators that might explain these principles. We met many times to discuss new ideas, identify redundancy, and agree on names. For example, we recognized the similarity between “am excited by this class” and “am excited to return to this class.” The later phrase was eliminated.

Noting that the many items did not reflect the intention of our study, i.e., focus on the present moment in the classroom, they were rewritten. For example, the item “I liked to question the things I am learning” became “In this classroom I like to question the things I am learning”. Themes emerged: the principle, Get Present, includes Aware of Sensations and Attentive to the Moment; Make Contact includes Connect with Self & Material and Connect with Others; Challenge Participation includes Respect Each Other and Challenge Each Other; and Desired Outcome includes Teaching Effectiveness (please see Table 1).

DISCUSSION

Hard evidence needs to be gathered supporting the notion of the present moment as an effective teaching tool. Additional quantitative instruments need to be designed and used which will allow testing the pre and post effects of the present moment within the classroom. Additionally, other studies need to be encouraged. This paper lays out the concepts, now further studies need to be conducted which address the question: what makes a classroom a place where students want to learn and teachers want to teach?
Table 1: Present Moment Listing: Principles and Themes

- **Get Present (GTP)**
  - Aware of Sensations (ASN)
  - Attentive to the Moment (ATM)
- **Make Contact (MCT)**
  - Connect with Self & Material (CNS)
  - Connect with Others (CNO)
- **Challenge Participation (CHP)**
  - Respect Each Other (REO)
  - Challenge Each Other (CEO)
- **Desired Outcome (DOT)**
  - Teaching Effectiveness (TEF)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ability to be present in the classroom with passion for teaching will increase the effectiveness of your teaching. Using the principles of get present, make contact and challenge participation with your students will engage them in the process of learning. Maintaining the presence of the moment through the three principles and your individual teaching style, will keep the students’ attention and enhance their learning process through identity. This is the connection between what the student already knows with what is being taught; this is the process of education.

When I began this project, I intended to accomplish three objectives. First, I wanted to share with you my excitement of the classroom, respect of the students and the joy that I find in each classroom moment. Second, I wanted to present the principles that I believe make the classroom a magical place for both teacher and student. Third, I wanted to offer a study that can help teachers keep relevant in the face of dwindling resources and larger classrooms. I feel that I have accomplished my objectives. I hope that you agree and are willing to take the next step and apply the ideas to your classroom.

REFERENCES


Mother Teresa. (2013). Taken on 01/04/13 from http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/mothertere107032.html


