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CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Roselyn Appenteng, Bryn Mawr College, 2013

I have always been fascinated with the experience of teaching and learning. While growing up in Ghana, we had a concept ‘Chew, Pour, Pass and Forget.’ This was basically the mantra for studying and taking our exams. Looking back, it seemed to be an intrinsic aspect of the classes that I took prior to coming to college. The primary goal was to be in class and absorb every detail in order to reproduce what the teacher required. This ‘formula’ seemed guaranteed for success. Yet, I had a nagging thought that both learners and teachers had to be somehow changed by the educational experience, considering the vast amount of time spent in and outside the classroom for educational purposes. Working with the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) for a significant part of my time at Bryn Mawr College has been my instinctive response to challenging the ‘formula’ for success that I had bought into.

Over the past semester, the most distinct lesson for me has been to recognize learning as an experience that cannot simply be contained in the classroom. I worked as a student consultant with David Ross, in his Intermediate Microeconomics class. We explored threshold concepts that he had outlined as fundamental, particularly at the beginning of the course (Meyers & Land, 2005, p. 373). These were considered thresholds because they were often knotty for students, requiring constant engagement but essential for approaching problems through a microeconomic lens (Meyers & Land, 2005, p. 374). I was initially curious as to how these concepts would be taught; in particular, I wondered if knowing that a given concept was problematic could affect the way in which it was taught. A complex addition, perhaps well suited to my question, was the professor’s use of the flipped model for the class.

This model changes the traditional conception of the teaching structure. In David’s class, the students watched a range of video lectures, had reading assignments, and worked on problems via an online module, all outside of class. They also provided feedback to the professor via the online module, which served as a constant evaluation tool for the different aspects of the course. Class time was spent primarily working on problems with mini-lectures to help students identify and master concepts that were important. The professor assigned students into groups and so they got to work on problem sets together while he had the opportunity to address their issues at a one-on-one level. The structure of the class permitted the professor to listen to the ways that students addressed problems in order to present them to the rest of the class. My role as a student consultant afforded me the opportunity to observe and understand the ways in which the students and the professor were challenged by this model. However, I was also inspired by the different ways that they navigated the experience.

I am used to a traditional lecture style and most of the professors that I have had add a personal flair to their teaching. So I can say that for most part it has been a far cry from my ‘Chew Pour Pass and Forget’ days because most of the classes that I have taken or worked with (as a student consultant) challenge me to be in an active instead of a passive role. Yet, I realized that David’s class required exactly that and more. I saw a significant paradigm shift in considering every aspect of the class as part of the students’ experience. The work that the students had to do outside of class was an essential part of what they did in class. I had initially envisioned the

moment of learning to be when the professor lectured; a point of closure in knowing exactly what was required for the class. The absence of a traditional lecture style felt like removing what defined the teaching experience. It was a unique challenge but an inherent part of the change was a teaching structure that was primarily student centered.

I had a better appreciation for the students' perspective from one of my own classes, which had the same feel of a flipped model. In this class, we read assigned articles and presented them in groups each week. For the final project we had to submit a National Institute of Health-type research proposal with a specific research question and fitting experimental methods to explore our outlined aim. The idea of the proposal had initially intimidated me, but while working on it, I realized that different aspects of the class had prepared me for this project. As part of our class presentations, I would meet with my presentation partner to talk about our articles. We would try to figure what was important and how the evidence and outlined experiments were crucial to the thesis of the articles.

In class, the professor would ask probing questions and give mini-lectures to clarify any of the salient points we had read about. He would also ask us what experiments were used and why, probing for the limitations of the experiments. The articles that we read situated the concepts that we learnt in ways that were tangible and practical. Each aspect of the course, in and out of the classroom, felt like a constant exercise in thinking. There seemed to be no respite. However, I am not sure I could have understood a lot without these various avenues for learning. Being able to work through articles with another student allowed me to express frustration with the concepts that were hard to understand but it also helped me to clarify the ideas that I understood. I could go to office hours with a myriad of questions that I had and class time was spent teasing out the fundamental concepts. My learning experience did not happen in one place. It happened in all the moments that I was engaged with the concepts, within and beyond the classroom.

I could see possibilities for these opportunities happening in David's class. It was exciting to observe microcosms of learning as a student consultant. Initially, the students were slow to engage with their groups, but later in the semester, some of them would have conversations about concepts beyond the tasks that had been given. Students did not need the professor to give his seal of approval because the structure of their class had been nurturing them as discerning learners throughout the course.

A significant part of navigating the challenges of this approach was the openness to communication throughout the course from both the professor and the students. Affirming the students' difficulties with adapting to the model, while providing support was also important. Finding ways to weave in the students' feedback was a constant aspect of the discussions with my faculty partner. It was also crucial to highlight the different aspects of the class: videos, readings, class time, and online work as part of the process of affirming other learning spaces.

Working with David in his flipped classroom made me rethink not only my own previous education yet again but also where learning happens more generally. In the end, the threshold for me switched from being the concepts that we started with to considering spaces that students were encouraged to actively think as learners. Working with this class was an invaluable

opportunity and I indeed felt that both the students and the professor were significantly affected by the educational experience.

References

Meyers, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2005). Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge (2): Epistemological Considerations and a Conceptual Framework for Teaching and Learning. *Higher Education* 49, 373-88. Print.