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THE 'FACE' BARRIERS TO PARTNERSHIP

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As a teacher in Singapore, I regularly encounter a classroom full of quiet students, reluctant to participate in class, to engage with the teacher when questioned, or even to volunteer for any project or initiative. Many teachers here are quick to conclude that Singapore students are passive or conformists. This observation is, in fact, not unique to students in Singapore, but also to the broader Asian region. Scholars like Cortazzi and Jin (1996) attributed such behaviour to the specific cultural values, such as the importance of deference to the authority of a teacher, as reasons for such passivity and reticence. Liu and Littlewood (1997), on the other hand, argue that people from certain cultures prefer not to speak up so as to avoid entering into situations of uncertainty.

I have found that as a teacher busily pre-occupied with preparing for classes, it is easy to forget how students perceive their learning experience, and I have been quite inclined to agree with the observations above. Fortunately, I have had the opportunity to be both a post-graduate student and a teacher. And this privileged position allows me to question some of my own assumptions as a teacher, thereby gaining deeper insights into the underlying reasons for the lack of participation here in Singapore. There is a lot more going on in the minds of Singapore students. Here, I would like to offer a new perspective on this matter.

The Importance of "Face"

The underlying motivation for the reluctance to participate or volunteer in class revolves centrally around issues of "face" or pride/reputation. This is not just about the fear of causing embarrassment to one's self by accidentally doing or saying something silly in front of others. What is perhaps unique to a Singapore context (and to some degree, a number of other Asian cultures) is the fear that speaking up or volunteering can also cause embarrassment to one's peers, thereby making them "lose face." This might seem odd, so allow me to explain. By speaking out (especially if one speaks well), one can have the unintended effect of appearing 'too outstanding' that creates a stark contrast with other students, thereby making the rest look somehow inferior by comparison. If the disparity of performance between the student who volunteers to speak and the rest of the class is too great, and if the student does this a bit too often, the class may judge the student for unnecessarily showing off his/her abilities at the cost of embarrassing everyone else present. This leads to much resentment, and it can translate into negative social consequences for that student, often in the form of ostracization by peers, outside the classroom.

Yet another reason for some students' self-imposed silence or not volunteering is the fear that once they have done so, they will have revealed their "true abilities" to the rest of the class. The phrase "true abilities" is something my students used to explain their disdain for class participation. This is driven largely by a desire for self-preservation. By revealing how one is

better than the rest, a student would then have to grapple with the stress of maintaining that reputation (or face) of being so outstanding. Subsequently, it would then be embarrassing if there is a slip in one's performance and one is overtaken by someone else. It is due to these complex face issues that some local students sometimes prefer to remain silent or to limit their own participation.

These face issues do not just affect the level of student participation within the classroom. They present a unique set of challenges here in Singapore to attempts at effectively implementing teacher-student partnerships, a pedagogical approach that fosters learning with students both inside and outside the classroom through a "collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6-7).

Teachers who attempt such partnerships in Singapore will find limited success. Here, I will cite some personal experiences to illustrate how these "face" issues hinder such efforts. Whenever I try to invite students to volunteer for such partnerships in the presence of their peers (whether in a classroom setting, or online where their contributions are not anonymous), I will get very low participation numbers from the same enthusiastic students unfazed by such issues. Those who worry about face issues would avoid responding altogether.

I have found more success when anonymity is involved. If students are given a chance to indicate anonymously their preference on what they wish to be taught (via an online poll, for example), I would receive significantly higher participation rates. The same is true if I were to speak to specific students after class, away from the eyes of their peers. I am more successful in recruiting them to partner with me and to create new learning activities and materials.

Interestingly, those who do participate in such partnerships draw the line when I offer them the opportunity to present their materials or conduct a short segment in class. They do not even want me to credit them in the presence of their peers in class. I had a student who partnered with me in designing a tutorial activity. I gave him the opportunity to conduct the activity before his peers, but he strongly objected to it. When questioned, he explained that it would be "very embarrassing" to stand out from the rest of the class. Upon further probing, the motivations go back to the complexities of face issues. Teachers are experts, and any student who tries to teach others is seen as arrogantly flaunting one's abilities in the face of one's peers. Similar apprehensions have been observed in Malaysian students at the start of their student-teacher partnerships (Kaur et al., 2018).

These face issues are cultural barriers that makes it difficult for teachers to fully tap into the potential of student-teacher partnerships. Much more must be done to address these cultural barriers so that students are more willing to put aside face issues and be fully engaged in the classroom as educational partners. From experience, I should point out that forcing students to participate or volunteer in any kind of partnership in a classroom context can potentially backfire as such actions can compel students to deliberately moderate and reduce the quality of their work or performance, so as not to stand out or reveal their "true abilities."

The Potential of Role Playing

One thing I have learnt from my own interactions with students is just how effective role playing can be in class. When students are given roles to perform, they are afforded the opportunity and the space to step out of who they are, to assume a different identity, and to momentarily become someone else, all of which can reduce the intricate politics among students in a competitive culture and alter the ecology of the classroom. Such role assignments are useful for engaging students to participate both outside and inside class in various teacher-student partnerships.

What is also essential for role play to work effectively in the context of such face issues, is that the teacher must assign the roles to students (even if roles are randomly assigned), rather than for students to volunteer for roles. This allows students to hide behind the excuse that they were made to do something, and so will not be held accountable for standing out for partnering with the teacher, or for putting on a good performance, thereby alleviating their anxieties about face. If they had to embrace activities associated with a teacher, it is not because they are stepping beyond the boundaries of a student to show off, but because they had been assigned a role to perform. Conversely, the role play would have little to no effect if students volunteered for specific roles. They would be subject to the same fears mentioned above: that they chose a certain role to show off their ability, or so that they could deliberately embarrass the rest of the class.

When role plays are structured well, teachers can rotate the assignment of roles, so as to tap on every student to involve themselves more fully in the learning process, and to contribute beyond the classroom setting (especially if the assigned role is structured to go beyond the classroom). This encourages students to take on an active role in their involvement in class, and encourages them to take on an increased stake in their own learning.

Conclusion

Concerns about face are strong among Singapore students, and it limits the success of teacher-student partnerships here. One method I have found effective has been through the assignment of roles and the use of role playing, as it provides students with a cover to fully perform without fear of judgement or embarrassment. It allows them to be fully engaged in teacher-student partnerships under the cover of anonymity. This is but one of possibly many other methods that have yet to be explored. What is important is that we need to be more sensitive to these face-related concerns in order to discover effective ways to alleviate such worries and so encourage greater engagement in Singapore students, both inside and outside the classroom.

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