

DWilsonNotes – For Teachers – Simple Changes, Big Results

Article on professional development objectives, questioning strategies, and physical proximity

Minor Classroom Adjustments Can Make a Huge Difference

by David Wilson

During my college freshman orientation session years ago, one professor gave some very good information on how to retain what we study, telling us ways in which we could get more out of our assigned reading by knowing what insights or material to expect.

“Do any of you,” he asked, “know how many lamp posts line the sidewalk between the library and the student center on our campus?”

No one knew.

“You’ve all walked along that sidewalk several times already,” he said, “so why would you not know?”

The obvious answer was if someone had told us it was important, there would have been an accurate count taken the very first time we walked by.

And that was the point.

When we are informed what to expect, what to look for, or what to remember, we tend to notice those things, and then—either mentally or literally—we make a note.

And that is the whole purpose of having objectives for lessons in school.

WHAT’S THE OBJECTIVE?

Students are like anyone else; they tend to lock on to things that they’ve been told are important.

And that’s why the **proper use of objectives** is a crucial component in student learning. Teachers who merely (sometimes blandly) state learning objectives at the beginning of a lesson, or—even worse—post objectives in the room or write objectives into the curriculum without ever referring to them, tend to have students who go through a class never really learning essential information because they simply don’t understand what to look for.

So the teacher must call student attention to what is to be learned, or what is to be mastered—not just on the front end of a lesson—but throughout the learning experience.

In addition, it must be clearly communicated in ways that the students understand. Once this is done, student achievement increases.

When it isn't done, students may be like the person who walks through campus hundreds of times, never knowing the number of lamp posts.

ASKING QUESTIONS

It's also vital for teachers to **wisely implement questioning strategies** during parts of class.

Too many times, a teacher may verbally ask a question to the class and allow anyone to answer. But that format also allows anyone to not answer, and many students do just that, choosing to not participate at all.

For that reason, just throwing out questions to see what happens is not a helpful way to assess.

It's far better to state a question, and then call on an individual student by name. If he or she incorrectly answers, or doesn't know, the teacher should promptly inform him that he will soon get a follow-up question.

Then the teacher should ask the same question to another individual student. Once the correct answer is provided, then the teacher can return to the original student who doesn't know, and say, "You heard Johnny say that the answer is _____. Do you agree with his answer?"

In this way, no one is afforded the opportunity to disengage. Everyone is held accountable and every student will know that a question may be addressed to him or to her at any given time.

It tends to keep the entire group more alert, and increases student engagement.

PHYSICAL PRESENCE

Teachers may also help students by **the way they physically position themselves** in the class. In other words, teachers should always keep as many students as possible in their line of vision. (Woe to the teacher who provides assistance to one student while turning his back on 90 percent of the class). It's better to assist a student from a vantage point that allows for a view of all or almost all students.

This is a very simple matter, but it pays great dividends in keeping students on task, and in minimizing nonsensical activity, (which, believe it or not, is something that even the best-behaved students sometimes embrace).

In addition, a teacher may greatly reduce the number of times students are talking or taking part in non-academic pursuits by simply standing near those who are involved. Many students will stop undesirable activities as soon as they notice an authority figure is close by.

While implementing this practice, the teacher usually doesn't need to say anything; his or her mere presence may halt the undesirable student activity. This allows the teacher to continue teaching, explaining, lecturing, or questioning, even as he or she is standing near a student or a group of students who have not been listening.

In short, students can be brought back on task, even without the teacher verbally calling upon them to do so.

This requires the teacher to naturally move around the room various times during any given lesson.

NO DOWNSIDE

If we think about these three procedures—proper use of objectives; having a purpose in how we ask questions; and a strategic use of the teacher's physical presence—all are helping increase student engagement, which tends to increase student success.

All can be implemented in classes right away with no further training (other than the initial attempts in class, which amount to simply practicing the procedures with the students a few times).

And it adds no cost to the school's budget.

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