Experiencing Aspects of the Transitions Firsthand

Abstract

When we look at our classroom full of students, do we have a real sense of the challenges they encounter? What is it like to be an undergraduate student? Many permanent university instructors are years, if not decades, removed from their own undergraduate experience. Examples of recent personal experiences as an undergraduate student are discussed, with emphasis on how these experiences informed my own university teaching. Changes in course organization, content presentation, communication and interaction with students, and evaluation methodologies are highlighted.

Introduction

In keeping with the theme of the 2004 AAU Conference, this paper is based on the firsthand experiences I had as I returned to the university classroom as a student twenty years after completing my first undergraduate degree. The goal initially was to complete my B. Ed. as a mid-life, personal learning initiative that was connected to, but not required in, my own instructional role as a university chemistry professor. This report is based not on theoretical understandings but on my own experiential learning. The original goal being the achievement of a B.Ed., there was no initial intent to examine the transitions involved in coming to a classroom as a student. Life, however, is filled with unplanned opportunities. As a result of the evolving nature of this work, there was no rigorous design per se; both during and after the fact I have attempted to practice critical self-reflection (Brookfield, 1987) to gain a more substantive appreciation for my own experiences. In this paper I have used my own journal writings and compared them to similar experiences reported in the literature (Cooper, 1995). The final portion of this work reports, in an action research mode (Merriam and Simpson, 2000), the resultant changes that I have implemented in my own university classroom practices.

Aspects of the Transition and Lessons Learned:

The Past Influences the Present:

I was the first one to reach the classroom. I turned the lights on and then scanned the set-up of the room. Returning to the classroom as a student after more than 2 decades, I still had this inherent desire to have a “good seat location.” I chose my seat and then checked my information sheet again to make sure that I was in the right building and room. I was anxious and nervous even though I had, in my
years as a student in the first-time-around, taken a plethora of university courses right up to the doctoral level.

Two decades earlier when I was first at university, and even as far back as high school, I was always anxious to select a good seat. Perhaps this was influenced by my near sightedness or perhaps by my keenness to achieve academically. Regardless, it was still a personality trait that emerged even decades later to surprise me.

Why was I anxious? The (first) course I had just enrolled in was not a requirement for career advancement nor was I taking it as part of a program. At this point it represented (only) $500 of my personal money. But it also represented a lot more—my self-esteem, a measure of personal dignity. Thoughts of escape crossed my mind—“Escape now with your dignity intact”—but these thoughts thankfully were counteracted by the image of five $100 bills floating before my eyes.

Examining my response and seat selection process, I realized that even my (relatively successful) past as a student was influencing my present experience in a formal educational setting. Why do I sometimes lull myself into seeing my university classroom as a separate entity in the lives of my students? How much more should I expect unpleasant experiences in my students’ past to influence their attitude and affective response to my classroom? How can I better allow for the cognitive and emotional baggage that each student brings to my classroom?

**Time and Bodily Constraints:**

I am disgusted with how long it took me to complete that paper!

Even with the level of skill in time management and organization that I had acquired over two decades as an instructor and scientist, I was still overwhelmed by the time that it took to complete some of the student-related tasks. I repeatedly caught myself wandering mentally down side roads in my new-found discipline. (Why do we not allow for, and build in, this mental freedom? Why are all of our full-time students so rushed to complete tasks that they seldom get to explore related issues that really interest them?) Perhaps, too, my own perfectionism and pride in my academic work was coming back to haunt me and influence my present habits and time management.

I think most of us have heard of the 20 minute rule pertaining to the average attention span. How well do we really understand the implications of that?

I am finding the two hour lecture periods to be excruciatingly long. Sometimes I need more mental stimulation; sometimes I need to just switch channels and
think about other things. I find myself multi-tasking in class . . . making a “to-do” list, drafting an outline for an upcoming paper . . . all things that I am disturbed by when I see my own students doing it!

What this journal entry is saying is that I discovered anew and firsthand how truly exhausting it is to just “pay attention” and stay on task—especially someone else’s choice of task. Sitting through class after class has renewed my understanding of the need to allow a mental or physical change. I hope I never forget the mental and physical challenges of being a student.

Having sat through a three hour, intensive exam that involved continuous writing, I went to get up and could barely move. I glanced over at another mature student who was also experiencing the effects of “joint seizure.” I am not used to sitting continuously in one position for such a long time.

My experiences as a mature student re-entering formal studies were similar to the stories and educational experiences of “Dawn,” “Ellen,” “Cassie,” and “Lesley” as reported by others in Cooper’s (1995) study of returning students.

Power Relationships:

All instructors know that they wield power by virtue of their role in summative evaluation of students. Knowing and experiencing it are worlds apart!

I got my papers back from my independent course on sociology today. I just can’t believe postsecondary education from a student’s experience!! The description of the first required paper was so obscure that I was not sure if I had even come close to the target. Students NEED to be provided with clear learning objectives! When I passed in the two papers and the learning journal, I knew that the best part of this submission was the journal where I had documented my foray into the unfamiliar discipline and my metacognition. When I got these papers back today, I got A- on the first paper (not bad), A+ on the second one (and he never gives A+) . . . and then I got a B on the journal . . . because, as he said, “he didn’t know how to mark it!” First, I was in shock at the fact that he was only at the end of the course telling me that he didn’t know how to mark a component that we had agreed upon earlier would be part of the evaluation scheme.

On another occasion I had the “good fortune” to experience what some of my students must feel from K through to
university. The instructor was heavy-handed, power conscious, and clearly resented being argued with by students. The instructor was distant from the class; the only examples used were of marginal relevance and had little personal impact. There was no room in this course to bring in previous knowledge or experiences; there was token sharing but, as a student, I was clearly under the impression that I had nothing of real life-earned meaning to offer to the course. How did I feel? I recall coming home after the second class and telling my spouse “If that was my first course as a mature adult or if that was my first course in this field . . . it would have been my last course.” When individual students are not respected and their life experience not honoured, then the teaching-learning process becomes robotic and impersonal.

Too painful to share are the entries in my journal pertaining to group work. In one class groups were quickly formed for a short term task. Students did not automatically distribute themselves evenly among the groups; I offered to move to another group. I was told in no uncertain terms that I was not wanted in “their group.” This interaction took less than 15 seconds but its impact is burned onto the CD of my mind. This made me more aware of the personal devastation that can result from group work gone wrong and the substantial impact one misspoken word can have on someone’s life.

Communication:

Becoming a student in an unfamiliar discipline area was eye-opening for me as an instructor. All of a sudden I did not have currency; I did not have “literacy,” at least not content literacy. I was sometimes left grappling with the meaning of new terms and, as a result, I lost the flow of the discussion or argument. Over the fifteen years that I have taught chemistry at the university level, I have taken for granted certain conventions and terms used in my primary discipline. Discipline-based jargon, terms, and conventions play a vital role in communication and understanding. Transparency is crucial!

Technology:

As an instructor I have adopted technology in various degrees in my classes. Yet it was only when I became a student that I saw and “felt” the real impact of technology. What had changed over the fifteen years since I had been in my graduate programs? Now I read most of the books and journals, making notes directly into my laptop. How things have changed since I used the available technology of index cards in my first university degree twenty years ago! Pausing to reflect, I know that we will have achieved real technological change when my thoughts can be transferred directly from my brain to the appropriate file on the hard drive!
Thank heavens for Novanet as I have saved myself a day in the Halifax libraries by using this delivery system.

This system of shared library catalogue listings and interlibrary delivery system has become indispensable. Likewise the access to electronic resources by proxy servers is something that was not even on the horizon when I was a student the first time around. The luxury of conducting research with electronic resources from the comfort of my own living room was unheard of in previous decades.

**Applying the Lessons Learned:**

During my reflection it was sometimes difficult to separate the lessons learned by virtue of being a student from the experiences and transformations which were related to the discipline (studies in education) that I was pursuing. Over the past two years, my methods of formative and summative evaluation of students have changed. Part of this transformation can be linked to my own firsthand experience of unclear Learning Objectives in a course. The other impetus for this change is the foundational knowledge I now have in pedagogical assessment methods.

I earnestly hope that I do not forget the powerful lessons I learned about the constraints of time and body. In my current practice, I almost never use the same uninterrupted classroom style for a whole hour class. Does this take more work and planning on my part? Yes. Do I think it is worth it? Obviously! I think that students need to be treated in a “systems approach.” They do not just come to us as cognitive machines but rather they bring with them weary butts, hidden but influential experiences from their past, personal anxieties, and a need to laugh once in a while. Some of the activities I have experimented with are not readily adaptable to a lecture hall setting. I constantly feel the years between my own life experiences and theirs: “Will they understand my reference to Apollo 13?” “Are they going to appreciate the connection to Seinfeld?” “How will they understand plasma as a condition of matter if their previous experience with the term is with reference to plasma televisions?” Have the two intervening years been sufficient time to transform my instructional practice? Not a chance; but based on my own firsthand experiences I am committed and in this for the long haul.

One of the challenges that continues to lurk around the corners of my practice is that of instructor power. My experiences were only sufficient to convince me of the detrimental effects this power relationship can have on learning—even when there is no ill intent present. My awareness of this has been heightened; I do take more care with the words I use and the attitudes I convey. Unfortunately my experiences only uncovered the potential issue, they did not address it in my practice.

Recognizing anew that making connections and seeing the application of learning to life is important, I have now designed a chemistry lab that links limiting reactants to the concepts and terminology of the students’ first year economics course. For the first time, the tour in the agriscience course was linked back to part of an assignment in my chemistry course, showing that chemistry is relevant to other aspects of science. These
are all attempts to help students make connections in their learning and to minimize balkanization by discipline area.

Noting my own emotional involvement in learning, I wanted to deliberately allow my students to express their affective responses. Students are asked to identify any relationship between Lab Safety and WHMIS training that they may have had to do for summer or part-time jobs. Many students complain about the repetition and waste of their time. Being extremely concerned about laboratory safety and not being willing to reduce that component of the course, I call this opportunity for students to express their response as a “bitch and be heard” session.

**Conclusion:**

Based on my personal experiences and reflections, I am now a strong supporter of the **necessity** for lifelong learning in the academy. By this I do not mean the occasional course in tole painting taken as a leisure activity; rather, I suggest that we should all challenge and stretch ourselves by periodically taking formal education outside of our disciplinary comfort zone(s). To become a student is the best way to appreciate and respect life on the other side of the desk or lectern.

**References:**

