

‘What I wished I had learned’.
A discussion of Teaching and Learning with EBD Business Studies Students.

Introduction

My essay relates to a discussion with a group of lower ability Business Studies students. I intend to give ‘voice’ to their reflections on their time at the school and the effect that their learning experiences have had upon them.

After three years, you would think that you would have got to know your students. Let’s face it, you have taught them for nearly twelve terms, dealt with many of their issues, seen them grow up (now that is a debatable point!) and then you decide to have a non-teaching conversation.

Imagine the scene, I have planned to teach them the finer points of cash flow forecast, but they are not in the mood to learn. I need to write one more essay for my masters. I don’t really want them to start breaking up the place through boredom and inactivity and so I decided to ask them the really important questions pertaining to their time at the school and how they have learned and progressed.

Let me introduce you to the class. It is my Applied Business class¹. I have seven year 11 boys, all deemed to be lower ability for a number of reasons²: ADD, ADHD, problems with domestic interaction, truancy, severe dyslexia as well as social disfunctioning³. Neither they nor I have any form of support: anger management, meetings with counsellors, teaching assistants, etc that I am aware of.

So now you can see why I wanted to talk to them rather than have them turn my much-cherished classroom into a battleground.

‘Look’ I say. ‘I know you do not want to do finance today and so I would like to ask you questions about you.’

¹ In the guidelines for Teaching Pupils with Learning Difficulties, DFEE/QCA. (2001), pupils with learning difficulties are defined as ‘unlikely to reach level 2 of the National Curriculum by the age of 16’

² Jones and Charlton (1996 and cited in Riding and Rayner (1998 p. 165)) identifies that there are a number of factors identified with learning and behaviour difficulties. These include;

- Learner characteristics within the individual
- Learner characteristics located within the wider community or social context
- Learner process within the learning environment (including the classroom, the school, pedagogy, ethos
- Learning process within the curriculum

I believe that this essay addresses to a lesser extent all of the features identified. However, here are also historical and perception characteristics as identified by the student which are considered as well. I try not to judge those perceptions in this essay, preferring to accept them at face value as being important to the student.

³ I did not have any information in terms of their profiling until the beginning of their last year at school and then the information was rather limited. I have never met with anyone to discuss the problems that the students have nor have I been able to attend any meetings in terms of combined strategies in order to meet their needs.

I immediately have their attention. They switch on to anything that involves them as individuals. They also relax in the knowledge that they are not going to have to struggle with numbers; a subject that they hate and sadly beyond their ability.

‘I have been teaching you for some time and you have been at the school for nearly three years now. This is your last full term (*cheer*) before you go in to the big wide world. (*Looks of concern and worry*) I have been studying a course for nearly three years and I have been looking at various aspects of my teaching and how I can improve it.

‘Bit late to be worrying about us’ I hear from a voice I know. I choose to ignore the barb but register the mood and the interest.

‘What I want you to do is to tell me about how you have been taught and how you have learned. I will be making notes but not names.’ They are a suspicious lot. Collectively, they have accumulated a large number of detentions and suspensions and anything that is recorded is bound to make them suspicious. I even promise them that they can have a look at what I write when it is finished to make sure that they are happy that I am using what they are saying and not their names.

As I make the promise, I can see that they have accepted my comments; a positive sign of trust in me. I can see changes in their body language as they think about their experiences of school and make the mental projection of their life after school.

‘I wished I had done better’ says one.

‘I wished I had not messed about so much’

‘I wished the teachers hadn’t bunked off’ says a third.

‘Why did they put all the stupid kids in one class?’ says another. The class goes quiet as the other members think about the comment. Is the speaker insulting the others and a fight about to start or is he making a valid comment? I hold my breath waiting to see what is about to happen. The silence is deafening. As the class thinks about the comment;

‘Yeah, we⁴ are all thick aren’t we?’ I relax as the others laugh. The comment has not divided the students but united them. They perceive themselves as a tribe of thick students bundled into a class together.

⁴ It is fascinating to see the interaction by use of the term ‘we’. The students have shown that they are united in their perceived ignorance. They use it as a badge when things go wrong and also as a tool for explaining their bad behaviour. As a consequence, it does make teaching hard for anyone. It is my experience that the students will undertake a consensus regarding whether they wish to learn for that period. Such a process of consensus is usually through a process of body language and use of language by the strongest member of the group. If the ‘leader’ is not there, then the group are completely docile. What makes matters worse is that the leader can change from week to week depending on the school based or social events that they had experienced prior to the class.

‘Why should we learn⁵? THEY⁶ bundled us all in together. They have made us fail. Why should I learn when THEY have put me with this lot in the lower tier? Employers think I am a waster!’ THEY don’t care about us. THEY don’t care about you because THEY have got you teaching us.’

Ouch, that hurt. On the one hand, I am deemed to be part of their team, yet on the other, I am deemed to be a failure as well. I don’t think that I am a failed teacher. I think I have done my best for them. Certainly, the students have a perception that they have been placed in a group where the system has decreed that they will not succeed. I think they have a point. I think that their comment is an indictment of the streaming system that if we put students into areas where they think that they are going to fail, they will be demotivated from the start.

⁵ Weber (1982) suggested that there were a number of features required for EBD students to have in order to get the best from their classes:

- Success
- Security
- Hope and a perception that things can get better

The teacher is the only one who can assist the EBD in accessing these qualities. Failure to do so will result in disengagement. Therefore, where does the failure come from? It is clear from the comments made by the students that they feel that they are at fault. However, there is evidence to the effect that ‘one dimensional teaching’ can also be to blame. Stott (1983) suggests that there is a need for the EBD learner to develop a style of learning and that this needs to be taught. To my knowledge, I have never seen lessons for students on learning style. Both Stott and Weber argue that there is a need to identify the learning styles so that the right strategy can be put into operation. Such an argument has merit. However, it would be interesting to see how this could be put into practice within the classroom. If there is an argument that similar learning styles are put into the same class, is this a form of streaming and commensurate with it all of the distaste that the students have for it.

The closest that I have seen for successful streaming lies within Vocational Qualifications where the student can aim to pass the course at the first level and then strive to complete criterion associated with the merit and distinction levels. If the student is not successful at the higher levels, then at least they have passed the qualification and gained the award.

I am not totally happy with the small list that Weber has provided. I believe that ‘targeting’ should be added. I have come to this conclusion because the students are so diverse in their needs, that there is a requirement for students to have individualised targets in order to meet their needs. This is in line with Vygotsky’s idea of a zone of proximal development (ZPD). A communal ZPD within the classroom is defined as providing conditions where there is completion of individual ZPD’s. Students with EBD’s may not necessarily relate to a traditional classroom environment. In the case of the class that I am citing, this is definitely the case. Students often bicker with each other and tend to want to pull each other down rather than to provide mutual encouragement and success. Therefore, there is a need to provide individual students with small targets which are motivating and encouraging. Hopefully, they will see the wider classroom environment as a means of achieving their reward and receive the recognition that they need and see that synergy is the best approach to success.

⁶ There is animosity by the students against the Senior Management Team. In reality, the decision to stream them was based upon a collective ideology that had the best interests of both the group and their contemporaries at heart. Interestingly, and not included in this dialogue, is a diatribe heaped upon the head of the Head Teacher. I have excluded this because it is based upon how they have been dealt with by him for their misdemeanours and is not based upon their perception of their learning. Nevertheless, there is a strong sense of injustice about the way they have been streamed for their learning and this is deep seated.

‘Employers will not think you are a failure. They will look at the whole person and take that into account. And if you pass this course, you will have a great qualification...’

The sighs and mock laughter is directed at my comments and not me.

‘No way, you know we can’t pass finance and so we won’t get the award. **** can’t add up let alone do the exam!’ He is telling the truth.

‘That is why we get all the supply teachers⁷. None of them know what to do and none of them are interested in us’

‘That is why we muck them about.’ They are not interested in us and we are not interested in them!’

This is good material. I think that they are really telling me what they feel from the heart. I may not agree with everything that they say, but by the same token, they are not holding anything back. Somehow, they feel that they have a voice. I decide to turn the conversation into something a little more positive.

‘OK, you have told me what is bad. You have recognised what we have done wrong. What should the teachers have done?’

‘Get involved with us. Get to know us⁸’

‘Make the lessons interesting so we don’t get bored’ I wince.

⁷ All classes have supply teachers when their own scheduled teacher is unable to be in front of the class. However, the absence of a recognised face seems to have had deeper meaning for them. I believe that this is because the student with EBD has a heavier reliance upon the teacher than a ‘normal’ student who can be relied upon to have some independent skills associated with their learning. Does this class have more than their fair share of supply teachers and other cover? I do not know. I believe that in terms of the distribution of resources, EBD students may have less than others because they have a need for more resources. However, the following footnote may give a clue to a potential reason for this conclusion by the student.

⁸ Weber (1982) identified that the student with EBD must have individualised teaching where learning must be based upon the needs of the individual. This is clearly accurate. Sadly, there are often not the resources to meet the needs of the individual student. Indeed, it is fair comment to say that resources will be allocated on the basis of maximum ‘added value’. If it is perceived that the output from the student in terms of progress is not the same as the amount invested, then the resources will be allocated elsewhere. Clearly, there is an ethical debate on teaching by finances, but that is a subject for elsewhere.

If Weber is correct, then the perception of having more supply teachers is not accurate. It could be that the EBD student, having a greater reliance on a recognised face in terms of their learning needs, feels it more when the recognised teacher is absent.

Capel et.al. (2001) identify the content of lessons for students with EBD:

- Knowing the strengths and interests of students with EBD
- Knowing the levels of language and literacy of students with EBD
- Consideration of alternatives within lesson plans if one learning project is not succeeding.

There is a cautionary note that teachers should remember that they are there to teach and not to counsel.

'Find out how I learn. I don't learn from books, I can't read all that well.'

'I never learned a thing copying so why does a teacher who is going to be absent get me to copy from a book when the cover teacher is in the room?'

'Don't put all the thickoes in the same class.' They all laugh at the insult. I get the feeling that although they are laughing, they are really feeling the pain.

'Give me a route out of here. If I don't want to stay with this lot and move up, I don't have the chance. I am stuck'

'Have the teachers and tutors listen'. There is a nod of agreement on this one.

'What do you mean?' I ask

'Well, we get told what to do, why can't we say that we want to learn in a different way?'

'Give me an example' I ask.

'Well, you want us to lean about cash flow. Why not go on a visit and see how it is done in real life?' I want to say that I am concerned about collective behaviour, but maybe I am judging their desire to learn balanced against the effects of freedom of the classroom. I decide to adopt silence as a way out of the problem. They realise that I am not going to make a comment, view this as a victory and so go on.

'We are not going to pass exams. Why do we have to have exams? There is a chorus of agreement on this one.

'We can do portfolio stuff, but we can't do exams. Mr ***** is really helpful and we get on. He helps us with spelling and it is really good.

'So what makes a good teacher?'

'Help us'

'Show us what to do'

'Listen'

'Don't stick us on computers'

'Have a laugh'

'Talk to us'

'Give out as much as we give back'

‘Treat us like adults’⁹

‘No revision’¹⁰. Revision is a waste of time. We know we won’t pass.’

‘But you are not adults!’ I have decided to challenge them on their own perceptions to establish how deep their foundation is for what they are saying.

‘If I am not treated right, I am going to be bad. I don’t want to be bad, but I don’t have any reason to be good.’

‘But you have been bad from before I knew you. Your records show that. Why?’

‘When I was in my lower school, I had a teacher who didn’t like me. If I did not agree with what he said, I would argue with him. He said that teachers are always right and students are always wrong. I went home and came back the next day to prove him wrong. He WAS wrong and he did not like it. I have been proving teachers wrong ever since.’¹¹

⁹ It is remarkable that this list is very much in line with research made by Mortimore (1988) who identified a series of factors that needed to exist for a positive classroom atmosphere in a class of students with emotional or behavioural disorders (EBD) The list includes:

- Consistency amongst teachers. I have discussed earlier the effect that the absence of their normal teacher has on the psyche of the EBD student
- Structured well-planned lessons
- Intellectually challenging teaching
- A work centred focus in lessons – I found that they preferred short sharp activities rather than a single one which lasted for the whole period. Therefore, I tried to mix my class with a series of basic maths and activities using the calculator, followed by small activities that were part of the specification
- Maximum dialogue between teachers and students
- Good record keeping that identifies a number of details associated with the student (personal/social/academic)
- A positive climate
- Flexibility

It is interesting to note that the students were pretty well defined in terms of what they wanted from the classroom. The ‘thickos’ were accurate in terms of what they needed and how they needed it. I find it fascinating that the ones who were not listening were their teachers and their managers.

¹⁰ Revision is perceived as a dangerous analysis of skills or knowledge that they do not know. It is fine to provide students with small tests in the classroom which they can achieve and which boost their confidence. It is a separate issue to provide externally set questions which the students would know in another set of circumstances.

¹¹ This is an alarming comment in terms of studies. Reynolds and Cuttance (1992) investigated the learning experiences of pupils in junior schools in London and concluded that the school makes a far larger contribution to progress than pupil background sex and age. In addition, Reynolds (1991) identified that the success or failure of the teacher-student relationship is critical in influencing positive or negative views about school. Given the age of my student when this experience occurred, it is likely that this has had a major contribution to his future behaviour. Needham (1987) would support this: ‘children construct their own knowledge through personal interaction with natural phenomena and through social interaction with adults and peers, Implicit in this view is that learning is an active, not a passive approach. Whilst the teacher has responsibility for getting students engaged in appropriate learning activities, it is the learner who is responsible for the learning that occurs.’

Shayer (2003) suggests that there is a need to recognise that ‘the main source of mediation for adolescents is their peers, rather than ‘scaffolding’ by adults’. This would appear to contradict the

‘Is it important that teachers should be proved wrong?’ I ask.

‘Yes, they make out that they are better than what they are. I hate them!’

The conversation ended with the bell.

None of this seems like new material or mind-blowing revelations. What makes this interesting is that it comes from students who have an interest in their learning. I feel that the students have also had an idea of what makes them learn for write some time and yet there are not any policies or procedures in place to meet their needs. They perceive their placement into specific courses as a form of pigeon holing without any recourse or way out. In fact, these students feel a failure before they have started their course.

I am alarmed by the comments made towards the end of the discussion, as the student is able to identify an event that disaffected them from school before they came here. I am concerned that with only a few weeks to go before the end of their time in school, the matter had come out and nothing can be done about it. I don’t know who I want to blame. Wherever I look, I can place blame but I can also see reasons why it was not picked up.

‘Ok, you all have a lot of teachers that teach you. Tell me one thing that makes them a good teacher’

‘Fun’

‘Young’

‘Helpful’

‘Gets to the point quick’

‘Cool. Acts like one of us.’

‘Know me’

And what would you say are the bad things....

‘Reads from a book’

‘Blames others for being a bad teacher’

‘Throwing things in the classroom.’

‘Mumbling.’

comments of Reynolds and Needham. It is fair to state that my student could be placing the blame on his lack of ability to learn on shoulders other than his own. Nevertheless, the fact that he could recall the event after so many years means that it must have had some effect on him.

‘The best is when they can’t spell.’

‘Winding up kids who are having a bit of a problem.’

‘Not apologising when they do something wrong.’

‘What about no-neck?’

‘No neck¹²?’ I had never heard a teacher called that before.

‘Yeah. No neck was the worst. He didn’t have a neck and so we called him that. He went mad. He would stare at us to see if anyone was going to do anything wrong. He would check us out.’

‘He sent me out for drawing. He knew the reputation of the class and was waiting for ***** to do something wrong. He knew that if he pushed the right buttons, it would happen.’

‘He was a supply teacher and he just picked on the vulnerable kids’

‘I wanted to punch him. He didn’t teach.’

The conversation had been brilliant and helpful. I have enjoyed our chat and so have they. My classroom is intact. As I review my notes, I see myself in all that they say. These lads have a few short weeks to go before they leave the school for the final time. They have been disenchanted for years and it would appear to me (without checking all of the evidence) that they have been shunted around for some time. I feel that my colleagues and I have failed them. I am sure that my colleagues would say ‘but for..’ and this is a good point. The students I am talking about are no angels.

As a postscript, I think I learned a lot from my students and resolved to make my lessons with them as best as I could. I asked them for their comments on each of my lessons and asked them if they had learned. I am glad that I have their trust to the effect that they could tell me if a lesson was boring or that they had not learned. I discovered that a repeat of a method of teaching was deemed to be boring. This meant that I was on my toes seeking different and enlightening methods of teaching and learning.

They have now taken the external test and I await the results. I also know that the idea of streaming downwards is to go so that lower ability students can mix more with other students who will provide them with the support that they need. If this is to be a success, then it is vital for teachers to provide a range of activities in order to meet their individual needs.

¹² Michael Fielding (1996) stated that there was a requirement for ‘Teachers to do all they can to provide learning environments which are comfortable, accessible and non-threatening; enable different ways of working; are able to celebrate success and value difference; are challenging and stimulating.’ I am not arguing that ‘no neck’ was a bad teacher. It is interesting that the atmosphere he provided was none of the above and as a result, the students resorted to type.

What does give me cause for concern is that whatever strategies are put in place for students will be based on a haphazard approach to their education. What is needed is to identify small targets for achievement and then to measure the speed and method of achievement or discovering the reasons for non-achievement.

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