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Curiosity and Questioning: Quality Learning in the Classroom

As educators, we hope to create the tangible context for learners to perform deeper, more reflective acts of feeling and thinking. The educational contexts we create are effective only to the extent that we engage our students thoroughly in learning activities. Although there have been many efforts to break down the multiple facets of learning into smaller pieces, learning is a multiple-source undertaking, and piecemeal steps have not been as effective as they promised to be (Iran-Nejad, McKeachie, & Berliner, 1990). Based on research by Holden and Schmit (2002) and Meyers (2002) on the importance of student questions, this study investigated practices which encouraged student engagement in meaning-making negotiation between teachers and students in a university-level, literature-based writing class. This research sought to answer the following questions: 1) Does multiple-source learning provide a new lens for the observation of reflective teaching and learning practices? 2) Is there evidence that shows that the practices adopted by one teacher actually relied on and fostered this kind of thinking among students, and if so, what were those practices? The participants in this study were 22 university students and their instructor, chosen because of the instructor's interest in encouraging learning through class discussion. Data were collected over one semester through videotapes of classroom instruction, formal and informal interviews, and class documents. Data were analyzed using constant comparison and simple descriptive statistics. Results showed the instructor facilitated student engagement through her use of probing questions. It appears that the instructor's use of symbolism, metaphors, and experiences within this class were teaching tools aimed not at fostering domain-specific, elaborative, one-right-answer interpretations but rather at recruiting multiple sources for creating multiple cross-domain perspectives. The instructor's questions encouraged students to rethink their understanding and restructure their learning, confronting and explaining new concepts. Likewise, students improved their grades by a statistically significant percentage over the semester.

As a research presentation, this session will present the findings of the research to the audience, but it will also be interactive, reflecting the nature of multiple-source learning. The objectives will be not only for the audience to understand and to discuss the research but also to understand through experience the type of discussions focused on in the research. They will understand how questions can be used to convey more than information to students. The audience can expect to participate in discussion and experience first-hand multiple source learning.