
What Does It Take?

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Much has been said and will continue to be said about managing a multilevel class. While this issue has presented its challenges to me as a teacher, I recently have been paying attention to my feelings as a learner in a class whose participants have multiple levels of experience. When I took a window repair workshop, I realized that I needed to use every learning strategy I had to make sense of the curriculum. As someone with 21 years of mainly positive school experiences, I think of myself as a pretty successful learner with a variety of strategies. But nothing could counteract the negative aftertaste this workshop left. My experiences led me to wonder more about strategies and how learners, myself included, decide which strategies to implement to get our needs met in a challenging situation and just when we decide to give up.

Here is what I wrote two months after the workshop:

When the presenter begins again, he turns to the window and starts taking it apart. He instructs us to turn in our hand-out packet to the fourth page and we review the vocabulary. Then suddenly he is talking fast and furious and the parts are flying. He is going on about chains. Some windows have chains instead of sash cords. He asks who has those. No one does. Nevertheless, he shows us how to fix these. I interrupt his speedy monologue a couple times to ask for clarification. I'm a good learner. I've paid my \$25.00 and I have a right to understand what is happening. He answers my questions, but doesn't take the hint to slow down. I look around the room to see if anyone else

is anxious. They look attentive and no one makes eye contact with me. I decide not to ruin their workshop by asserting myself again.

I leave totally drained. If I took anything from this learning experience, it's the feeling that it is hard work to take care of yourself as a learner in a learning environment that's not...not tailored to your needs, not protective in some way.

There are so many interesting questions related to this topic of a multilevel class where learners must advocate for themselves or leave empty-handed: What strategies do I have for self-advocacy. How well do they work in a particular classroom environment. In what ways are they compatible or incompatible with the teacher's style and goals for the class, and if they aren't compatible will I/the learner develop and try new strategies? What is the impact of the learners and their strategies on the curriculum in the multilevel classroom?

An ESOL Math Setting

Meanwhile, I began co-teaching a math class with Lorrie Anderson at the Jewish Vocational Service English as a Second Language program in Brookline. This setting provided me with a new opportunity to look more in depth at my questions regarding self-advocacy. The math class includes learners from a variety of different countries. The levels of English proficiency as well as math facility are like stars spread out across the night sky. Deceptively close to the naked eye, but light years away from each other. In this class, Lorrie and I were definitely working hard to meet students' needs. Students' interactions with us had a

profound effect on the steps we took to meet their needs.

The class meets for 90 minutes twice a week. Generally the class begins with a warm-up for everyone. Often these activities require manipulatives like cups or tiles and scarcity of materials makes it practical for students to work together. Students who are having trouble get individual attention. A longer group activity that will offer learning opportunities for everyone follows and then students have time to work independently on worksheets that reinforce or teach pencil and paper (closed number problems) with basic operations.

One of my primary purposes for co-teaching at JVS was to collect data for the A.L.R.I.'s evaluation. Annually the A.L.R.I., as part of SABES, takes the opportunity to reflect on its work, gathering feedback from the field through interviews or surveys and using this data to plan. As part of this year's evaluation on the impact of technical assistance on student outcomes, Lorrie and I kept journals of what happened in class. I was in class one time a week for five months. Although the primary goal was to observe and record student outcomes, when Lorrie and I debriefed and when I wrote in my journal, I found myself focusing mainly on how students were acting in class. For example,

Most ignore their partners. It took some encouragement to get folks to come up to the board.

I could see that J was working on her adding. She could do it if she tapped out the numbers as she went. In other words, six plus eight is not automatically 14 for her, but she could keep track of six, seven, eight, etc., until she managed eight numbers. When I went to begin to show her how to do division, R. interrupted me. I'll show her, she said. She turned the paper towards her, and took a deep breath and then began in Spanish.

During any of these class segments, but especially during times when students are supposed to work independently or in small groups, the challenge is for them to work along until they get it and they are done and can move on. What strategies do they use when they are stuck, can't get it, and can't finish and move on?

Attracting the Teacher

In my class observations, I began to notice that students seemed to have a preferred mode or strategy for operating in the classroom. The most common strategy during times when students were working individually or in pairs is to call out, "Teacher." This

appeal for help usually succeeded in bringing Lorrie or me over. Usually help arrived within a minute or two (although we never had an independent observer time us). For some students this was their only strategy and so on the rare occasions when it took longer for one of us to arrive, H and R or M would get louder. They would begin to grumble to themselves or to me if I were within earshot but was helping another student. Recently J delivered an ultimatum. "You have no paper for me? I'm leaving."

F and L had entirely different strategies. F is a quiet type. She is a bit older than some of the other students who have young children. F did not have many years of schooling in her home country of Ethiopia. She can add and can multiply. Larger numbers require more time. Both she and her ally N are disgusted with practicing these operations. Her strategy is to sit. Her mouth rarely moves to smile or to chat with a peer or to participate. F wants to do long division. Lorrie and I on different occasions have taken what feels like a lot of time to explain the steps. We model it, go over the worksheet that gives an explanation and then do it again, asking for her to supply the next number or the next step. I realize that I have certain expectations of someone who is learning something new. I expect, for example, that she will offer more readily, ask a question, and show with her body language, by leaning into the problem, that she is actively listening. F doesn't meet my expectations, but that is a subject for future exploration. The important thing for now is that F's silence speaks to me. When she doesn't go along or try, she pricks my conscience. I interpret her silence to mean that the lesson or activity at hand is beyond her and she needs support. And when I ask her to confirm my interpretation, "Do you understand?" she says, "No."

LH is quiet too, however, she looks busier than F does. Left on her own, with fractions, addition, whatever, LH works. She manipulates the numbers, not always the way the paper or her teachers had in mind. Lorrie and I give her little bits of attention because we know she is less advanced than other students. We wonder how she can be so industrious when others who are more advanced are stuck and craving help. Yet she doesn't demand a lot of attention. Instead, LH keeps working after the class is over. She often stays for half an hour and takes advantage of the time Lorrie and I can spend with her then. Other students use this strategy of creating another opportunity for help as well. Occasionally S and N come in before class starts. Though Lorrie and I intend to be talking about the lesson or adding hand-outs to folders, we are instead working intensively one-on-one with the early students. This time feels so valuable to their progress that it is rewarding for all of us.

Aside from the requests for help, N's strategy has been the loudest to our ears. N has been pulling, pushing, tugging to make the teachers and the curriculum conform to her needs and expectations. Her primary strategy has been to critique the lessons. "Too easy." She often asserts what she needs. (If every student followed her lead, the multilevel class would really take its toll on us. . .) By asking repeatedly for what she wanted, N wore us down. Looking back, we never wanted or expected to teach fractions. It didn't come up in the first needs assessment. This class is funded to be beginning level. Many students need practice with basic operations before they can comfortably manipulate fractions, and yet, as soon as we finished budgeting, there we were.

Turning to Each Other

A strategy I would expect to see—students turning to each other for help—was not at the outset a favorite of this class. At least, I didn't see it; a more careful observer might have seen this happening in subtle, unobtrusive ways. When Lorrie and I took over the class, a number of students were promoted to the higher level math class. The remaining students continued working as they had before: they worked independently during class time on worksheet packets. The culture of the class seemed a quiet one. The first learners we met were four women from three different language groups. Perhaps their language and cultural differences kept them from the usual camaraderie and help students give each other in an ESOL or ABE class where the students share a primary language.

On the other hand, if a higher level student sees someone else struggling, more and more often she offers to help. Many times this offer is made as a question to me, as a request for permission to act in this way. The first times a student in the know helped a struggling student were times when I initiated the request. I remember specific instances when I asked a higher level student, "Can you explain to . . . how you did this?" Perhaps I set the norm. I could have said to the struggling student, "Why don't you ask so and so for help?" Why didn't I do this? Implicit in my thinking are a few disturbing ideas: to help is an imposition and I am in a better position to ask for this favor than the student is. More likely I was worried that the struggling student would say, "No, I don't want this other person's help. I want yours," if given half a chance.

Sometimes help was offered before I asked for it. This has happened to me in other situations. Some-

times students who understand will intervene and ask to take over from me because I am having trouble giving a useful explanation. Maybe the struggling student and I are having a communication problem and the higher level student can take over and explain in the native language. Or equally likely, I am struggling because I don't want to give the answer. I want to provide the opportunity for the student to make the discovery. Higher level students sometimes think I am to be pitied in this situation. They can take over and explain and it will be less time-consuming and painful for all involved. They are right that it will take less time. I am not sure if they are right in that the student hears someone else's math rather than finding the sense or logic in it for themselves.

Another situation in which students helped each other is when Lorrie and I completely withdrew our help and we said explicitly, *you* can help each other, but *we* will not help you. After weeks of working on fraction concepts, we wanted to do a short pencil-and-paper-type of quiz. After taking the quiz, students

would meet with us individually and have the opportunity to explain concepts with manipulatives. This would give each student more than one mode to show what she knew. Following a neat idea by an elementary or middle school math teacher, we wrote up a simple quiz. We

gave the students the quiz and told them that they could work on it alone or with anyone they wanted to for 20 minutes. Then we would take the sheet away and give them a new copy of the same quiz. Students who recognized each others' strengths and made use of each others' expertise would benefit in their performance on the quiz. In this situation, students did turn to each other to a limited extent for help. At other times when Lorrie and I tried to give pencil-and-paper assessments, for students to be able to see their own progress as well as to show us, they talked quite a bit with each other. Lorrie had to keep interrupting them to break off the chatter.

In an interview with a student for the evaluation, I took the opportunity to test my perception of the class norm. I asked LH,

MM: What do you do in math class when you are stuck?

LH: I ask the teacher.

MM: (I smile) You do that some, but sometimes you keep working, don't you?

LK: Yes.

MM: Why don't you ask another student?

Higher level students sometimes think I am to be pitied in this situation.

LH: They laugh or they don't want to help.

MM: Why?

LH: Maybe they don't want to help. You might get better than them.

MM: You help M.

LH: I help her because she asked me, come sit over here. you can help me. I help so she doesn't get angry or sad, but sometimes I can get confused. [Meaning, I have to leave my own work in the middle and then I lose my place.]

It's not completely clear to me that LH was able to use the verb forms precisely enough to express her ideas. Was she saying students had laughed at her or they might laugh at her? Her idea that students are so competitive they wouldn't want to help each other was expressed as speculation, but what had given her the indication that students felt this competition? Was there an undercurrent of conversation in other languages that communicated these feelings or was this carried in some cues Lorrie and I unknowingly gave. LH's comments reminded me that though we did lots of group work, we never explicitly talked about teamwork, about how helping each other would help the whole class, etc. This lack of attention to teambuilding was undoubtedly a result of the open entry dynamic that characterized the first few weeks of class. The class went from four students to eight, then to twelve, with some learners attending only once. Finally a core of students started coming in mid-January and Lorrie told the counselor her class was no longer open to new students.

So What?

What do I learn from all this? What do I make of it?

One could predict without in-depth research that in a multilevel class, the higher level students are more likely to get their needs met. Clearly, the better the students are in English, the more confidence they have. Therefore, when the teacher asks for feedback or ideas, the higher level students are the first and the quickest to answer. They are the most coherent. The more they talk, the more the curriculum shifts to meet their needs. Clearly N's audible criticisms of the curriculum had an impact on our planning. Confident people make their needs known.

However, good English was not the only strategy that succeeded in changing the direction of the curriculum. In a sense, dramatic—that is, visible—persistent appeals, were equally successful. The more dramatic

the strategy, the more likely it is to have an effect on the pacing. Silence, in F's case, was just as persuasive as wordiness. At times it is difficult to separate English from drama. For example, N used both. Her body language spoke volumes, but her ability to communicate in English was also a useful tool.

But what of the students whom I haven't mentioned? Who don't or can't stay after class. Who are too shy to ask a peer for help. Who work diligently instead of quietly refusing. They are the students who slip between the cracks. One of the joys of teaching adults is that they don't act out the way children do. Discipline is rarely one of the energy drains of the job, and yet, perfect behavior can work against a student getting her needs met in a multilevel classroom.

Lorrie and I have talked together about the students and their strategies, which appeals we want to answer, which feel disrespectful. When students call out repeatedly, though one of us has noted and acknowledged them, they seem to be saying, "I am the most important person in the class. You *have* to pay attention to me." Lorrie and I are doing our best, and too much assertiveness feels like an unreasonable demand. One student stands out as so aggressive that her calls for help generate more animosity than assistance. Teachers need to think about how to reinforce the behaviors they want to see.

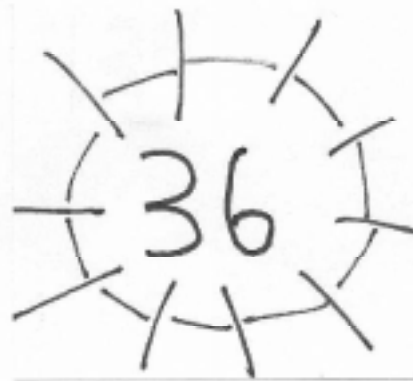
This would make a fascinating topic for video taping or for an outside observer. Everyone reacts, intentionally or unintentionally, with subtle or not so subtle messages that affect those with whom we interact. Which strategies do we greet with smiles, or with a neutral response, or with a strong reaction, positive or negative? What messages do our reactions send?

Expanding and Modifying the Repertoire

The more strategies a student has, the more flexible she can be in advocating for herself in different educational settings. Lorrie and I created opportunities that would expand students' repertoires. We actively encouraged them to use or change strategies, first by building comfort and experience with new strategies:

- *Undermining the disappearing acts:* For students whose reticence tended to make them disappear, we started a warm-up that everyone could succeed at and that everyone had to

talk some for. Lorrie or I wrote a number on the board (e.g., 36) and asked each student to give us two numbers that multiply or add together to make the number. Students who don't automatically know their nines tables could still say $35 + 1$ or $30 + 6$.



- *Working together:* We designed activities that would give students experience working together. If the purpose was really for students to work together, then we gave them one set of materials and a structure that reinforced the assignment. For example, to review math terms like “plus,” “add,” and “sum,” we gave students cards with a symbol or word explaining an operation. They had to circulate and find someone who had a companion to theirs. This was so successful that, once in groups, students wrote the names of their group members on the board, along with the words and symbols of their groups and spontaneously made up a problem to illustrate their operation. When it is time for students to work in their packets, Lorrie always encourages students with the same hand-outs to sit together, to listen to her explanation together and to help each other. This works occasionally.

- *Leveling the playing field:* Most recently Lorrie and I have read aloud word problems with easy numbers. Students have to listen and write down their answers. Then Lorrie and I pick someone to send to the board. She becomes the scribe and other students have to tell her what to write. We usually pick a quiet student for this job; meanwhile, the other students who could write or answer the problem easily have to express themselves and their math process orally. It’s clearly a struggle for everyone. If the student at the board doesn’t understand, it isn’t her fault and if she does, she can pretend not to, challenging the students giving oral instructions to be clearer. This activity clearly levels the playing field and helps students who are quiet and helps the group work together.

Then we looked at changing strategies, altering strategies to fit a new direction:

- *Giving direct feedback:* When a student’s strategies backfire, what then? If a student’s strategies are undermining their success, because they aren’t compatible, or because they are successful in the classroom but won’t be appropriate to other settings, the ideal would be to give students feedback. “I don’t like it when you...yell at me from across the room more than once,” for example.

- *Interrupting:* At times Lorrie and I have interrupted students when they were conversing in their native languages if we felt they would get more out of pushing themselves to speak English. We ask them what is going on if there is tension in the class.

Implications for Other Settings

There is no way for any teacher to know first-hand which strategies students will use in other situations when they want answers to their own questions or need to ask for help. Since school is such a formal setting

with rules that even students with little schooling seem to know, I wouldn’t be surprised if students use an entirely different set of strategies outside the classroom. Yet I have this nagging feeling that the one most common strategy—relying on the teacher, the authority figure to answer the question—is so comfortable that this strategy might be the one students prefer in any setting. In my experience, relying on the authority figure is a mistake in many settings. For example, if a worker always saves her questions for the supervisor, she will reveal to the supervisor her lack of knowledge and possibly mistakes as well. In many employment situations it is important to save face with a supervisor, to learn from peers all that one can. In many situations, adults have to wait in line: the post office, the bank, bureaucracies. We can’t always run up to someone in charge to find out which line is the right line. We have to piece together the information, and asking others is often the best strategy. And that is why I so much want them to have practice asking each other, learning from each other, and revising an answer from a peer that is maybe only half right using information they have that is a different but also true piece of the puzzle.

Conclusion

I recently met two new math classes. These groups are native speakers of English, and in my time with them we’ll be learning math by developing a stronger intuitive feel for numbers and operations. With my recent experience in mind, I’m observing the class and talking to the lead teachers.

From the beginning, I’m carefully observing students’ strategies, in particular those that might work against them. I’ve learned about one student’s double-edged strength. She saves all her work and has all her papers well organized. She has repeated the pre-GED class for a few cycles so now she is able to do homework assignments from the book by going home, finding the same paper from the previous semester or year, and filling in the answers again.

I plan to talk with the groups about the question, “What is your job in math class?” I want all the individuals to be aware that the group can succeed as opposed to the competitive spirit that LH mentioned.

I’m still struggling with what it means to create an environment where students have the opportunity to perfect different strategies. I know that dramatic strategies are some of the most effective, but I’m wary of creating a dynamic where every need is a melodrama acted out for my benefit. I plan to monitor my own behavior in classes where I am the learner. The only way to pursue this topic seems to be to observe from the inside as well as from a true observer’s perspective. •