

CREATING A POSITIVE AND ENGAGING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT/INVENTED INQUIRY QUESTION

Observation

This week, Melissa and I met about setting new norms for communication moving forward in our working relationship. I had previously asked Melissa questions regarding her management style that she felt were disrespectful and undermined her authority, particularly because I had not thought to ask her these questions out of earshot from the students. Some specific topics that I asked about were regarding her policy on letting students that were not enrolled in her class socialize with her students during class time; trying to engage students that were watching videos on their phones rather than working; and talking to students that threw casting wax to their friends rather than creating sculptural molds with it. Melissa stated that she was flexible and tolerant with the situations as long as students were getting their work done. I responded by comparing her to previous teachers that were a little more strict about students being focused without distractions. I meant to bring that topic up to process that what I was noticing in her class was different than the way management was handled in other classrooms. It wasn't my intention to offend Melissa, and she recognized that too when we were having our discussion. Nonetheless, she expressed that her feelings were hurt and asked if there was a way that I could ask her questions about her teaching style in a way that didn't undermine her authority in front of other students. I quickly apologized and suggested that we create norms for our working relationship. One of the norms we created was asking her questions in a "See, Think, Wonder" format, which I thought was brilliant. I got a chance to practice asking her questions in this way, and that made Melissa very excited. Because of how successful norming was for our working relationship, I offered to do norming with Melissa's student teacher (and my former classmate) so that I knew how I could be helpful to her and Melissa as the second in command, part time TA.

Analysis and Questions

This experience really taught me the importance of norming. Melissa and I agreed that we should have normed the first day we met so that we knew that we would be on the same page. I've also practiced norming in teamwork situations with peers in art education. I've noticed that my working relationship with my teammates were a lot more supportive when we created norms for each other than when I worked with a team that didn't establish norms. Norms are also a great way for me to respect the culture that's already established in the classroom without learning from consequence. I didn't realize that Melissa permitted certain behaviors in her classroom because she wanted to make sure that students felt emotionally safe and supported. She claimed that some of her students that dealt with emotional challenges outside of school did

better work if they had friends hanging out with them. She also felt that she encouraged a positive and self-reliant work environment if she wasn't hovering over students, constantly yelling at them to get their work done. She's made these decisions because she valued her students' emotional health, which was something that I had not considered. Our conversation was important because it made me realize that it was both our responsibilities to make sure her students felt safe in her classroom. I couldn't compare her to other teachers if her teaching style worked for TVHS's culture.

Though I thought that the conversation was beneficial for both of us, it still raised some questions for me as a teacher. For example, could too much strict discipline cause trauma for a student that comes from a difficult family situation? When does the line get crossed between watching YouTube videos to de-stress and choosing to not get the work done because art is a "fun" class? What if having friends in the classroom becomes a distraction for other students that are serious about art? I guess it's based on the teacher's personality, the student body culture, and the expectations of the school.

Reflection and Application

My conversation with Melissa gave me a lot of epiphanies about why I might have accidentally come off confrontational in our conversations. I told Melissa that I'd experienced some traumatic teacher bullying as a student in my undergraduate experience. I also mentioned that I'd worked for teachers in the past (some being long-time role models) that frequently deflected blame on me rather than taking responsibility for their actions regarding classroom management. Since going to therapy about these experiences, I've learned to start seeing my mentor teachers as humans rather than perfect role models. This has made me somewhat skeptical and defensive when I noticed the way a teacher ran a classroom or told me how to handle management on their terms. I also realized that my definition of "good classroom management" in an art room was heavily reflected in the high academic achievement settings that I attended in my high school and undergraduate college, which was picky about social distractions so students could make high quality art. These are things that I need to continue to resolve and heal so that they don't continue to affect the teamwork dynamic I have with my future mentor teachers.

In addition, I think that I came into Melissa's classroom with a little more pickiness because I'd been so used to working in middle school settings, which stressed calling out behaviors on the spot. Kendra Vair, who I'm working with at Conrad Ball Middle School, wastes no time calling out disruptive behavior while she lectures because

she's trying to instill good learning habits and an emotionally respectful learning environment. I'd been getting a lot of feedback from her and the students that I've been too easy-going and need to hold them accountable for their actions more. This management style contrasts Melissa's, which is a lot more laid back. I recognize that these are two different school environments, but it's definitely hard to be a TA for both teachers and not apply one person's teaching style into another person's classroom.

What I've learned from this experience is that it's unfair to compare teachers to each other, even though I'd been doing it to figure my own teaching philosophy. That's no different than comparing two women on their looks based on their physique. I felt very bad about hurting Melissa's feelings, but I think I handled the situation well by apologizing for my actions and offering to norm. Moving forward, I have to re-evaluate what my philosophy is as a teaching assistant, not as a co-teacher. I have to be okay with adapting to the classroom culture rather than holding it to my standard. I am willing to norm if it means that students feel safe and the learning environment for all of us is positive.