

Elizabeth Frasciello
Teaching Philosophy

Introduction

I was in my sophomore year of high school when I took Honors U.S. History I. Although I had academically earned my place in that course, I felt as if I knew nothing about history and would struggle endlessly throughout the year. Our teacher was new faculty that year and when she walked in with her thick blond curly hair in a bun falling off the top of her head, the class couldn't help but grow wary of what was to come in the next two semesters. She began with a quick introduction, "Hey guys, what's up? I'm Ms. M. I'm a Jersey girl straight up. Gotta love my Bruce Springsteen. Woo!" The class laughed along with her and played into her cordial greeting. Secretly we were all thinking, 'how in the world is this bimbo going to teach us anything?' She continued, "Alright, so I figured it's the first day of classes, we're just gonna do 'Shut-Up-and-Color'." As she handed out cartoon coloring pages of historical figures and events with packets of crayons, the class stared at each other in disbelief. This wasn't a lesson. This was a waste of time. As we colored in our little Abraham Lincolns and Benjamin Franklins, she walked around the classroom sitting down with groups of students and chatting with them about their summer, their lives, and their pictures. What I first assumed was a cop-out of a lesson, turned out to be a decent way of becoming familiar with her students. The rest of the year she continued to have laidback classes that included discussion, activity, music, art, and so much more. Although I thoroughly enjoyed the style of class and how entertaining it was to spend time in that room, I was most satisfied with the fact that I actually learned something.

Less Stress, More Creativity: All Paths Between

The chains between stress and creativity support a learning environment in which students and teachers work cohesively to create learning experiences without anxiety and with an ultimate result of deeper understanding. Identifying the two-lane road between these two points can shape a classroom into a destination of constant growth. Not only does more creative lesson planning keep students engaged but it also allows all students with different learning styles to comprehend the material. When students are able to understand information and keep up with discussion there is limited stress involved in the learning process. This lack of stress also gives students room to get creative in their own thinking.

More Creativity

More inventive teaching strategies can minimize student stress. Each child is individual and carries with them their own strengths and weaknesses. Bernice McCarthy emphasizes the importance of learning styles. She divides students into four basic categories and within each she specifies how they learn best. Not all students will benefit from a single type of lesson or activity. Each lesson should be constructed in order to reach and relate to each student in a way that makes it comprehensible for each individual. This requires the teacher to be familiar with the students in the class. “The complexities of the student’s culture, education, and impulses, therefore, help create a unique mind that we need to understand as we guide each student”(Simpson, Jackson, & Aycock, 2005, p. 150). Being familiar with the group will set a path for how the lesson should be constructed so that it can incorporate and address all learning styles present.

The concept of Critical Pedagogy asks for the teacher to make the subject matter to the student by relating it to their world, culture, and life experiences (Wink). Realistically analyzing what this implies asks the educator to assume every topic learned in school somehow relates to something in every student's life. There are certain topics in school that either cannot be directly related or would have to be stretched so much that they become essentially insignificant in relation to the lesson. It is impossible to find a way to relate every subtopic of every subject to some aspect of every pupil's life. Perhaps this calls for a change of curriculum. If it does not have any correlation with the student's life, should the material be considered unimportant and discarded? This is another question for another time. As an educator, it is more important to address what a single teacher can do within a classroom. The lessons must be engaging and interesting as well as relevant and educational. "Attention cannot be forced, people are either interested or they're not." (McCarthy, 189). Teachers cannot assume that students will pay attention simply because they are expected to. It is the job of the educator to keep students engaged and active.

When students are excited about a subject they can become more active in the lesson. Educators must "construct a learning experience that allows diverse and personal learner responses." (McCarthy, 192). By having individual learning styles addressed and presenting the material in an engaging and learnable manner, students will be more interested in the class. If a student is paying attention and contributing to class activities, it can be inferred that they will actually absorb more information. Students will naturally be less stressed if they understand the materials covered in class. Lessons and work should be designed in a way that exercises a student's knowledge rather than test their

progress and performance. These types of assignments cause stress and lead the student away from any interest of comprehension. Assignments should inspire and encourage learning and help the students to feel accomplished. They should not be strenuous and make the student feel incompetent or unintelligent.

As well as being creative and innovative, teachers must be flexible. John Dewey reminds teachers: “We cannot assume that the student we knew last year is the same one we will teach this year, much less five years later when she is a teenager” (Simpson, Jackson, & Aycock, 2005, p. 151). Students will change, classes will change, and lessons will take turns in various directions. Although lesson plans are important to build structure and focus of a lesson, the teacher must not feel restrained to the original plan. The classroom experience is about the students’ learning. If they inquiry about certain topics, it is the teachers responsibility to feed that curiosity and offer related wisdom. Educators are often called upon to improvise when the class has brought the focus beyond or away from the original lesson plan. This is not to say that the teacher should abandon the original form completely, but that it is vital to teach what the students want to learn. Based on the progress of the class and the interests of the class, it is necessary to continuously revise and even completely recreate lesson plans.

Less Stress

Less stress allows the student to be more creative, both in their thinking and the way they choose to teach themselves. Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist who supports a constructivist class, says that children can only learn what they teach themselves. When a student is able to free their mind from anxiety they can start to think broader and more abstract. This type of self-learning and analysis will aid in critical

thinking, meaningful learning, and deeper understanding. Less stressed students will also be able to enjoy the class and the material being presented, therein being more attentive and responsive.

Educators must also consider the students' actual goals and the role they play in guiding their pupils. Teachers should act as a navigator and help lead students towards their true ambitions (Simpson, Jackson, and Aycock). How many pre-college students dream of being a novel writing, equation solving, chemical engineering historian? It is necessary to recognize that not all of these common general education courses will present themselves significantly in every human's life. By removing stress from these general education courses we leave room for the student to put energy into their own interests. Education should not only offer the specified curriculum, but it should "uncover the real worlds and real lives of our students." (Allsup, 9). These interests may fall outside of the school system, but it is the teachers job to help prepare students for their next step in their, ultimately career oriented, lives. Nowadays, getting superior grades in school will not supply students with the appropriate means for gaining access to their dream professions. Allowing time for individual cultural experiences outside the classroom is important. If students are stuck at a desk all day and night stressing over homework and studying for tests, they will never have the time to soak in a substantial amount of culture on their own.

Conclusion

Looking back on that first day of Honors U.S. History I, I realize now that whether she understood the impact of her own teaching methods or not, she was perhaps

one of the best teachers I have experienced working with. Examining her laidback, student-centric, and stress-free style, I can expand upon those ideas and create a classroom in which students take hold of the lesson and with it create a learning experience that they are personally invested in. I have found that the most effective way to capture this experience is to reduce stress by formulating more creative lessons based on student needs. McCarthy's 4MAT is a solid structure for addressing learning styles so that all students are taught in a way that they can comprehend and retain information. By giving students the freedom to learn in the most effective way for themselves, they can learn in a stress-free state of mind. This path between stress and creativity can then begin to work in the opposite direction. This would take the students in their stress-free environment to a place where they can calmly and willingly think more critically and gain deeper understanding of individually meaningful subject matter. The ultimate result of following the two-way road between less stress and more creativity is an environment that teaches students in a stress-free manner that allows them to then make connections and take pleasure in their own learning.

References

Allsup, R.E. (2003). Transformational education and critical music pedagogy: examining the link between culture and learning. *Music Education Research*, 5(1), 5-12.

McCarthy, Bernice. About Teaching 4MAT in the Classroom. Wauconda: About Learning, Incorporated, 2000.

Simpson, Douglas J, Michael J.B. Jackson and Judy C. Aycock. John Dewey and the Art of Teaching. California: Sage Productions, 2005.

Wink, Joan. Critical Pedagogy: Notes from the Real World Fourth Edition. Boston: Pearson Education, 2011.