

Reflection on my in-class rehearsal

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I will preface this reflection by noting that I lost my sheet with the prompting questions (and the notes I had made on it) on the train to New York, and am going from memory. To the best I can recall, the questions were 'what were your goals and how did you succeed in these?', 'what did you think you could improve on in your rehearsal?', and 'what further goals do you have to improve your teaching practice?', so I will try to answer these.

I suppose a good place to start is my stated professional learning goal: to orient students toward each others' ideas and toward the curriculum. I felt I did a decent job in this respect: I tried to involve students both actively (e.g. having them vote, asking them to organize the votes, using the results as the basis for our discussion) and intellectually (e.g. asking them to come up with their own ideas for voting systems using ranked choices, inquiring after two ballots had been completed whether one gave us a more convincing winner and why) and included a group discussion component for peer-to-peer sharing. Although the class felt me-centred at times, I kept these stretches short, and I am proud that I was flexible in responding to the students' suggestions and the way the voting played out.

However, I am not perfectly satisfied with the way I balanced the two ways of orienting students. (This is not to say they are opposed, but is to say that there are some tradeoffs.) In a subject where so often teachers choose to orient students solely towards the curriculum and not often towards each other, I may have overcompensated, and I felt that the students may have left those activities with a sense of having learned something but without being clear what that something was. This was highlighted in a comment in the feedback regarding my board organization: were the students supposed to take notes? Which of the methods that I wrote on the board would they be responsible for? While this activity was just the start of a unit where I would make these things clear and students were not

supposed to take notes but instead be forming a base with which to understand the following content, I didn't make this as clear as I should have in the rehearsal.

Another goal I held going into rehearsal (and in all my teaching), though not explicitly stated, was to be authentic. This means both that I tried to be authentic to my own teaching style in rehearsal and that I always try to be authentic to myself while teaching. I believe that moments of authenticity—whether they are a shared momentary joke or a whole class—can help create the connections that make teachers stand out to students. One moment that stood out to me during the rehearsal was when the votes changed from one ballot to the next, without good reason. I let my incredulity show through and gently teased the class.

I want to finally reflect on a moment in which I didn't really know what to do or say. Alexander had mentioned something clever, and I praised him, to which Shirley interjected that I had implied she was not praiseworthy ("you're saying I'm dumb" or similar). I had not intended to imply that and, off guard, responded that she contributed in other ways. While I intended that to mean that she knew other things which she shared with the class at other times, in retrospect it is one of those things people say as a backhanded compliment, and Shirley quite rightly pointed out that I had bought into her premise, thus turning an offhand comment interpreted wrongly into a genuine insult. I think at this point I paused and said that I needed to reflect on this, apologized to Shirley and continued with the lesson.

Why do I feel the need to reflect on this particular exchange? Apart from the discomfort it gave me as a teacher, I think it contains important lessons for my future teaching. One of these, I think, is that students will consciously or not read a variety of things into what I say in class, whether I intend these or not. Indeed, it is not enough to avoid saying that a student is stupid (for example), but it is necessary to avoid implying it. I think this is particularly important because, unlike Shirley, most students who I have

made to feel bad or stupid will of course not point this out, and they are likely to take the implicit criticism to heart.

This brings me around to the concept of mindset, which I was introduced to in an education class last semester. Our professor was making the point that we as teachers need a growth mindset about students, rather than a fixed mindset; this is to say that we need to believe that our students have the potential to grow, learn and change, that they never fit into fixed categories such as “smart” or “stupid.” It has been hard for me to understand the effect of a teacher’s mindset, but I think the exchange I am discussing is a good example: I described Alexander as ‘smart’, thus implicitly buying into the fixed categorization of students as ‘smart’ and ‘stupid.’ If I had instead praised his actions rather than his being, it would have been much more difficult for other students to take this as criticism of them.

I do struggle with changing my mindset—which has developed over years of cultural influence and confirmation-biased observations—but I am newly reminded of the importance of doing so and will make this a priority for ongoing professional and personal development.