

An Evaluation on American Teaching Style in Latvian Universities' Classrooms

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Abstract

The first problem that arose in my freshman (first year) courses that I have taught at the University of Rhode Island and at the Rochester Institute of Technology: student attendance and the percent of students who performed poorly. Now the question to ask: how to start correcting the problem? Try to implement new ideas as active class engagement and creating a hands-on atmosphere in each course vs. a theoretical course (practice makes perfect). How successfully were these ideas implemented in my classrooms in the American universities and furthermore, how successfully will these ideas work in classrooms of Latvian universities?

Keywords: Evaluation, Teaching style, Latvian universities

1. Introduction

After teaching a variety of courses for 15 years at the Rochester Institute of Technology and 6 years at the University of Rhode Island I gained very valuable teaching experiences. In particular, to improve the student attendance in my classes, to increase the students' academic performance, I decided to implement several ideas such as class engagement in the mini-workshop style, weekly homework assignments, and frequent testing. These new ideas have certainly decreased the amount of D's, F's and W's (unsatisfactory grades in the American education system) in my classes and increased the class engagement and class retention as well. However, I had the opportunity to implement these ideas only in the American education system. Now the vital question to address: how will these ideas be accepted in Latvian universities' classrooms?

I have taught graduate level seminar courses at the Aegean University on the Island of Samos in Greece and taught several graduate level seminar courses at the University of Latvia in Riga. However, I have never taught courses where I assign students grades outside the U.S. until this spring 2016 semester at T.S.I. and at the University of Liepaja. In particular, teaching a course in Discrete Mathematics at T.S.I. and a course on Introduction to Photography, Discrete Mathematics and Vector Calculus at the Liepaja University. The vital question to ask: how do students react to the idea that I ask them questions during class and assign them work to do outside of class?

First I would like to start with my experiences with my Introduction to Photography course that I am teaching at the University of Liepaja; in fact students thought that I was crazy after I told them "You will be taking photographs and you will present them in every class; also other students and I will be asking you questions and giving you constructive criticisms". I received the first reaction from the students "You are the professor and you should be teaching us how to take photographs and why are we taking photographs first?" On the other hand they began to understand that they will not learn by watching me do things and began to understand that 80% of learning does occur outside of class. Moreover, they continued to understand that you have to make mistakes several times before you start understanding how to do things right. Moreover, now the students take pride in their photographs and gradually started to understand what the common mistakes that can occur while taking photographs. At this point they clearly understand that this is a hands-on course they will not learn unless they try first. In addition, students also got opportunities to learn how to present their portfolios and write essays about their portfolios as well. The purpose of this course is not only to learn the fundamentals of photographic composition but to learn from your own mistakes, from mistakes of other students and from professor's mistakes; most important of all, to try to understand the sources of mistakes and problems that occur in each photograph.

In my Discrete Mathematics course that I am teaching at TSI students liked the idea of a mini-workshop course where I give them a problem to try to solve first for about 10 minutes; in the meantime, I go around the class, watch the progress and give students hints and emphasize where the mistakes are happening.

Afterwards, we go over the problem in full details by indicating to what details it is vital to observe in order to start analyzing the problem correctly and what common mistakes several students made while attempting to solve the problem. In addition, I pointed out that it is crucial to concentrate at the very end of the problem and finish it correctly. The students started to understand that learning must be a perpetual process and it is important to attempt to do every single homework problem that is assigned as it can and will appear on the future tests.

In my Introduction to Photography course, the students liked the idea of taking photographs first before we learn more fundamental techniques of photographic composition. In addition, each student presents his or her photograph during each class; then their classmates point out what is done right and what mistakes occur. I indicated to the students that unless they make mistakes in their photographs they will not learn; it is pertinent to learn from your own mistakes, their classmates' mistakes and my mistakes as well. Moreover, I even encouraged students not be afraid to make mistakes when taking photographs as it will help improve the quality of their future photographs.

Now an interesting question to ask: why did I implement these ideas in my American classes first before trying to see if they will work successfully in the Latvian classrooms? First of all, the current American education system offers a practical education where the European education system on the other hand offers a more theoretical education. Therefore, it is absolutely essential for students to have a very perpetual rhythm of learning; that is, weekly homework assignments, frequent testing and class participation and discussions. In order for students to learn successfully they need to do the problems themselves; otherwise it only makes sense when the instructor does it only in theory and not in practice. For example, you can watch a pilot operate the plane and it makes perfect sense until you try to do it on your own.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, the vital question to address: are these ideas working successfully at T.S.I. and at the University of Liepaja? I certainly believe so. First of all, more students are comfortable in asking questions and even more students started answering questions that I ask in class as well. Second of all, more students started coming to my office hours with questions too. Furthermore, most of the students started showing all the steps in their problem solving techniques and got accustomed that every step and every detail needs to be verified and explained. Moreover, students understood that it is vital to make mistakes in order to learn and to understand the sources of mistakes; not only to learn from your own mistakes but from others' mistakes as well. Most important of all, not only students were comfortable with asking me questions but were also comfortable with asking each other questions and giving each other constructive criticisms.

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