

English class as a Learning Organisation/School

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Instead of a top-down learning structure with the teacher telling students what to do, I have turned two of my classes into a learning organisation where students become more responsible for their work and their actions.

I teach Practical English Classes at the Department of English, so my students are future teachers of English, aged 19 to 22. They are rather motivated and mostly proficient in English. However, I noticed that during the year students tend to come to my classes less well prepared than I would wish them to be and that quite a few of them learn only to pass the exam. Besides, I had for many years tried to figure out how to assess them – should I assess their progress and therefore let the less proficient ones get good grades for their hard work or should I grade their performance and this way let the really good students rest on their laurels and collect good grades for the work they had done in the past? It became clear to me that the traditional top-down approach was not bringing the results I expected so I decided to introduce change.

For a few years I had wanted to work in a group that learns and encourages learning among its members, who are supportive, curious, ready to change, and sensitive to the needs of others. In short, I wanted to be part of a learning organisation, but in the end, in order to reach this vision, I had to initiate the creation of a learning organisation myself in two out of the four classes I teach. What I expected from my students was high-quality work and a readiness to change and keep changing, in return I treated them as my equals, lead and not ruled them and supported experimentation and individuality. On a very practical level this meant that all our rules were agreed upon by every member of the group, and we had regular pow-wows, chaired by a different student each time, where we discussed process questions such as how far students had got with their English and where we were as a group.

My experiment started as a project I developed on a leadership course for teachers in the summer of 2005. I put it into practice at the beginning of the following academic year in two out of the four groups I teach. I chose first-grade students because I wanted students who had not yet been influenced by the assessment methods at our department. My fourth-graders, however, were invited to join the experiment because of the nice rapport we had built over the three years I had already taught them. I counted on their loyalty and support.

Theoretical Background

In fact, instead of using the term *learning organisation* I should go for *learning school*, a term coined by Adrian Underhill (2004), because I used the concept of learning organisation in a school environment

At the core of the experiment lay my own values, things that are deeply important to me. Firstly, I expect my students, and myself, to grow as individuals during the learning process. Secondly, I am convinced that teaching and learning are enhanced if the class atmosphere is good, and finally, according to Choice Theory (Glasser: 1984) the students and myself had to satisfy the four basic psychological needs (belonging, power, freedom and fun) in order to feel happy and be more

productive. If these values were realised, the students and I would be ready to change and keep changing – including in unpredictable ways; we would develop (in year one) or consolidate (in year four) honesty, sensitivity, and friendliness in the group and share power. All of which would help the students do higher-quality work. In order to “ground” my vision I decided to blend the elements of a learning organisation with elements of Glasser’s Quality school (Glasser: 1998)

What I still had to preserve was the outward framework of my subject, so students had to do two tests during the academic year, had to have one graded presentation and do an oral exam at the end. These were the elements that were not negotiable – they had to be included in the course. However, what was negotiable was how we approached and carried out the “non-negotiable” part.

Learning Organisation elements

We had meetings – I called them pow-wows – once a month. Here we discussed process questions. Any disagreements or problems among group members were discussed on this level. What we did was sit in a circle. Students suggested the topics we discussed at each meeting by writing questions or comments on a piece of paper and leaving them in the specially-made suggestions box which was placed in the corridor for everybody to see. Every time we had a meeting, a different student led it, and we discussed the problems one by one and decided on certain topics by voting. My vote was worth exactly the same as any other member’s vote. At these meetings we observed where we were as a group and if there was a problem, what we, the whole group, were going to do about it.

Pow-wow meetings turned out to be extremely good for the group because the students felt more united and started feeling that they belonged to the group more. Besides, it soon became obvious that the system allowed them to have a say in certain issues concerning my running of the course and we sometimes changed the rules or I adapted to the wishes or needs of the group if they managed to put them in words and discuss it. The newly acquired freedom in decision-making often resulted in their being too strict and demanding on themselves.

In order to follow their own progress better students wrote individual progress diaries, which they handed in in two parts – part one after the first term and part two after the second. They noted down their feelings, successes and anxieties. Basically, they addressed the following issues: Where am I now? Am I getting where I want? Do I need to change anything?

On top of this, I carried out half-term interviews with each of them. During the interviews the students were encouraged to assess their progress and comment on where they were at that stage. In short, they answered the following questions: Where am I? What do I like about this course? What do I want to change? What questions do I have?

Quality School elements

Instead of my grading them, I handed this task over to the students and encouraged them at the beginning of the course to think about what grade they each wanted to have so that they could work towards it throughout the year.

In order to achieve that, they had to first create their own criteria. That proved to be a rather trying and challenging task for them but after they had completed it, they were quite happy with the result. I

noticed that during the process of creating criteria both, first- and fourth-year students initially focused on punishing mistakes instead of rewarding good points and they needed a lot of guidance to change that. It is therefore not surprising that at first they came up with extremely strict criteria. Only after a few heated but rather fruitful discussions were they ready to give in and create a more student-friendly set of criteria.

Extra work for the teacher

According to the criteria created by the students, taking an active part during classes was paramount for a good grade, so I had to closely follow their progress in this area, too.

I also kept a separate diary for each class, noting down the dynamics of the group, my observations and my feelings about the group and the project itself. Later this helped me remember the details and get an overall picture of what was happening in class. Admittedly, it also proved rather time-consuming.

Year One – my silent group

The sixteen students in the first year of their studies proved to be a mixture of ultra-high achievers and diligent but not very successful learners. They were all rather shy – the good ones because they didn't want to stick out, and the not-so-good ones because they were almost ashamed of their mistakes. The atmosphere eased considerably after six pow-wows with me constantly reminding them that they were very quiet and that the main purpose of my subject is to give students a chance to speak. So, in the end they gradually started taking part in what I could then call debates.

I had a feeling that they felt insecure and didn't really trust me either, as if they half-expected me to turn nasty and vengeful, punishing them for their language mistakes.

All the students in this group had problems setting their goals – deciding on which grade they wanted to have at the end and working towards it. They felt shy and came up with excuses such as “I'm going to have the grade I deserve” and the like. It took me a long time to reassure them that setting a goal may be a good idea.

Pow-wows were another problem here because students found it hard to express their opinion. Very often we were sitting in the circle in silence, them gazing at each other's shoes and feeling uncomfortable. Only the final two or three pow-wows came as a relief for all, them and me, because the students finally took a more active part and the discussion really seemed like a discussion.

Year Four – Chatterboxes

Before starting the Learning Organisation project I had already taught this group for three years and I knew them pretty well. There were eighteen powerful individuals in the group who all had views on absolutely everything. Their English had always been extremely good, so they expressed themselves with ease. Therefore, I was surprised to learn that they accepted the project with mixed feelings - they were particularly unhappy with creating criteria.

This group had always been very good in debates, but the problem was that the more daring ones

dominated while the more quiet ones shied away. One of my goals for this group was to help them learn to respect others and their opinions and to communicate in a civilised way.

In year four, pow-wows were successful because students immediately realised the advantages of being able to take an active part in the decision-making. One of the first rules we established for the group was lifting the chewing gum ban that I always impose on my students in the first year. I decided to give them power in this, too, partly to show them that I was really ready to share power and partly because I wanted to see how we were all going to react to the change. At the first pow-wow we agreed that I would try to tolerate their occasional chewing and if I was really bothered by it I would have a chance to do something about it at the second pow-wow. But then something happened: during the first lesson after lifting the chewing-gum ban, almost everybody chewed, but as weeks went by, fewer and fewer students indulged in this habit. By the end of the year most of them gave up chewing during the class.

Another interesting issue we decided upon as a group was our approach to writing Test One – vocabulary and reading comprehension check. I suggested they wrote the test in pairs for a change (I am really grateful to Kari Smith for this great idea) and the novelty was accepted unanimously. At the next pow-wow I was given feedback on how they felt before, during and after the test. The results were only a little better than usual, but what students pointed out was that they felt more relaxed knowing they would be able to check their test with a colleague, and that therefore they did better. Besides, they told me, nobody wanted to give the impression they were relying on their partner's help, so they studied more for this particular test than they would have otherwise.

Results

Most students in the fourth year achieved their goals – they became better listeners and were more careful in debates. On top of this, most of them achieved the grades they had set for themselves at the beginning of the course. The strict criteria they had set made them participate in class work even more, which made this group particularly lively and successful. The first-year students, on the other hand, were not so good at reaching their goals in grades but in the end they started taking a more active part in class. They developed into a friendly, happy group and even suggested we continued our project the following year because they thought they had learned a lot and that the new approach was “good for them”. They stressed that they didn't have a feeling they were not successful and pointed out that they themselves should have done more with the freedom they were given instead of being afraid of it.

References

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