

Finding Balance in a Spiritually Diverse Classroom

A Teacher's Guide to Awareness, Sensitivity, and Respect

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Abstract

While many scholars focus on the spirituality of the teacher and its effects on a class (Byler, 2009; Purgason, 2009; Morgan, 2009; Ferris, 2009), the students' spirituality and how it reveals itself in the classroom cannot be disregarded (Vandrick, 2009; Smith, 2009). Students have the potential to add and change any classroom dynamic through the beliefs they have. These spiritual beliefs can influence student reactions in communicative activities and interactions with teachers and peers. Learning motivation and attitude can also be linked to a student's spiritual or religious identity (Lepp-Kaethler & Dornyei, 2013). Learners should be free to be themselves and think for themselves in class, without any occurring bias or coercion. (Brown, 2009) This paper provides suggested approaches of how teachers can maintain balance in a classroom of religiously diverse students, allowing for the expression of various beliefs, while being aware, sensitive, and respectful of those variances.

Introduction

Defining Imbalance

From a dictionary perspective, imbalance is defined as a lack of proportion or relation between corresponding things. Teachers are the head of a class and can forget how much power and influence they have, based on their role (Purgason, 2009). If teachers are not careful and hold their opinions and beliefs about spiritual topics above the students, the risk of imbalance increases. A one-sided class, influenced by one set of beliefs and convictions, can overpower or dominate the students (Purgason, 2009). There is also a risk that teachers could choose to eliminate all spiritual or religious dialogue and topics from a classroom. Avoiding certain controversial topics creates a disconnect between the class and a “natural part of humanity” (Purgason, 2009 p. 191). If students are expected to be active members of a classroom dynamic, their beliefs and convictions should be equally represented and upheld.

Maintaining Balance

After defining imbalance, it is important to understand why balance is necessary. In the language classroom, typically in ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts, teachers have classes of diverse groups of students. Knowing what place spirituality and moral values of both teacher and student hold in the classroom, as well as the intentions behind decisions that teachers may make, add to the long list of requirements for an aware, sensitive, and respect filled classroom (Ramanathan, 2009). Every topic discussed in class has the potential to open up complexities and unaddressed intentions. Instead of avoiding certain topics, what if teachers could consider, include, and accommodate the place and role of student spirituality?

Discussion

Awareness in the Classroom

Some teachers may already be cognizant of the cultural and linguistic differences that make up a classroom and the challenges that come with those aspects. However, what should be considered when a student suddenly disagrees with something and leaves the classroom? What is the underlying problem between the two students who are having a hard time working together? Why is the normally outgoing student hesitant to participate at a certain time or about a certain topic? Does this student not know that plagiarism is wrong? A teacher’s religious (and cultural) beliefs can limit his or her vision and cause a lack of acknowledgment of other ways and

perspectives (Ramanathan, 2009). Expecting students to be or act a certain way takes away from who they are as a person as well as creating potential conflict in their religious (or non-religious) identity. Teachers can become dependent and trusting of their own way of seeing, so much so that it leads to clouded vision and bias (Smith, 2009b). Instead, teachers should be looking for ways to become more knowledgeable to who their students are and what they add to the classroom. In order for teachers to gain that knowledge, they should start learning about and understanding factors that shape student views and identity (Kubota, 2009). Considering the social, religious, political, and cultural factors of students can initiate understanding and open dialogue that integrates different perspectives (Kubota, 2009). Humbling oneself as a teacher and placing the focus on the student perspectives can help remove any concerns one may have about denying their own identity, humanity, or spirituality. That shift allows the teacher to be in a place of listening and understanding rather than with a stance of disagreement and lack of acknowledgement.

Knowing the background of the students is important, but not enough. Knowing who the students are and the context of the class serves to provide a more complete framework for teaching and learning. Listening to students and getting to know them can help set a deeper foundation for topics that may be controversial (Purgason, 2009) A teacher starts this awareness by recognizing that students may not “leave their faith at the door” (Smith, 2009 p. 242). Smith (2009) also brings to light that these students will “not only come to class with language aptitude, affective filters, language acquisition devices and the like, but also as Christians, Muslims, agnostics, atheists, etc.” (p. 242). According to Lepp-Kaethler and Dornyei (2013), “language, identity, and faith are closely intertwined” (p. 173). Bakar, Sulaiman, and Razaai (2010) found that there is a religious motivation that is linked to language learning, motivation, and one’s beliefs. In some cultures, in which religion plays an integral part, one’s identity can be influenced and derived from those beliefs (Kubota, 2009). For teachers and learners, these factors are “likely to influence attitudes and behaviors in classroom settings” (Smith, 2009a, p. 242). Teachers should consider all of the above-mentioned factors when facing a classroom full of students and deciding the best approach for language study and appropriateness of chosen topics.

Sensitivity in the Classroom

The classroom setting is not the place for a teacher to focus and share their own beliefs, rather a place for teachers to encourage and empower students. This does not mean that teachers should never state their opinions. Through questions asked to students, a teacher's identity can become more transparent. It is the responsibility of the teacher to keep a "clear vision of your own mission of a teacher" (Brown, 2009 p. 270). Through neutrality and respect, students will see the teacher's values that come out in a lesson. Purgason (2009) stresses the importance of creating a classroom that allows students to use English to express their own voice and opinions in a safe and encouraging way. Both Ferris (2009) and Purgason (2009) see value in the discussion of social issues and controversial topics. Ferris (2009) and Purgason (2009) don't shy away from delving into topics that may lead to deeper discussion or stronger critical thinking skills. These types of discussions should be done so in a manner that sensitivity is a main focus. Even if teachers are sensitive to students' opinions, needs, and feelings, other students may not be as sensitive in their comments. (Vandrick, 1997) Teachers need to create a place where students feel comfortable and able to share their beliefs without judgment. Teachers should consider dialogue as Canagarajah (2009) does, as a form of collective achievement. Creation of a classroom where all sides are active listeners and participants can interject their ideas and beliefs without fear of judgment may lead to eventual overall development of student thoughts and values (Canagarajah, 2009). Through a teacher's example, students can learn some basic concepts that White (2006), deems as crucial to success; "acceptance of difference, willingness to learn, and trust in each other" (pp. 5-8). When a teacher models this approach that accepts differences, students can learn to be sensitive to the opinions and values of their peers.

Brown (2009) stresses the importance of language learners having the ability and opportunity to be free to form their own opinions and thoughts. Armed with this knowledge, teachers need to be sensitive to and aware of the power that comes with their role as a teacher. Kubota (2009) shares that "teachers must be aware of the power relations that might position their students and themselves differently" in certain topics or beliefs (p. 230). If students come with certain ideas, it is the teacher's responsibility to be sensitive to their feelings (within reason) and ensure that other students are appropriate in their responses and interactions. That being said, it is crucial to be conscious of how far certain opinions and beliefs can be represented before

becoming offensive. If a student truly believes something that could be hurtful, harmful or disrespectful to others, it may be a good time to shift the focus on other topics. Being sensitive to students and their beliefs should consist of knowing how far to take a discussion or debate. Being in control of a topic in order to remain fair and open to the comments when they arise is necessary for a successful classroom dialogue.

Respect in the Classroom

Wong (2009) addresses a fundamental rule for respect in a reminder to treat others as we would like to be treated. To understand this statement fully, it is important to break it down in two ways; how do teachers expect to be treated and how can that transfer to learners? Expectations of respectful treatment may consist of listening for understanding and humility in learning from others. Familiarity with Canagarajah's (2009) collective dialogue and openness to learning from students can increase the respect level in the classroom. This opportunity can move classroom discussions from the superficial side of a conversation to a deeper opportunity for understanding. Giroux (1983) and Canagarajah (2009) stress the importance of learning from students through listening and humbling ourselves to a different view. Through this engagement, new ideas and positions are introduced and in turn, a broader perspective can be found (Canagarajah, 2009). Humbling oneself as a teacher serves as a model and as a teaching element. Canagarajah states, "If we want our students to learn from our experiences, values and knowledge, we have to give them (students) the courtesy of listening to their wisdom" (p. 85). This opportunity gives everyone the chance to be both a learner and a guide on new perspectives and deeper understanding. It must be noted that being open and active listeners of other beliefs and perspectives does not mean that one should not have a set position or values of their own. Rather, by including that knowledge in a new perspective only strengthens it and allows for deeper engagement (Canagarajah, 2009). Values and strong moral beliefs don't disappear from someone while entering into a discussion with someone of differing beliefs; instead, beliefs can expand and deepen with further consideration and new perspectives.

Byler (2009) writes about the role of being a gracious guest. While he is making the connection between Christian English Teacher (CET) and a host country, this could also apply to a teacher in regards to an ESL setting. A teacher should "focus first on waiting, listening, and

learning” (Byler, 2009, p. 127) and be a gracious host. Such an attitude creates a classroom dynamic that does not attack anyone or any stance, but rather invites students to travel through the intricacies and differences that make up a controversial topic through exploration rather than finger pointing and ostracizing.

General Guidelines for Teachers

When it comes to the spirituality of students and moral beliefs of students in the classroom, a teacher cannot be too cautious. The above information stresses the need and areas for awareness, sensitivity, and respect, but what guidelines are there for teachers to follow? Brown (2009), introduces three guidelines for dealing with controversial topics that all place significant responsibility on the teacher to give opportunities to students, create an atmosphere of respect, and maintain a threshold of morality and ethics in the classroom. These guidelines show that it is not necessarily imperative to leave controversial topics at the door- including religion. Teachers shouldn’t feel like religion or other controversial topics are off limits. These topics can and should be discussed, debated, and contemplated in class. If teachers can create the respect and maintain balance in the classroom, there is a lot that can be discussed and learned from one another. In the following list of guidelines, Brown’s (2009) are among several others that should be taken into consideration when faced with a class and the opportunities to allow true dialogue and understanding while balancing differing views and morals.

1. Treat others as we would like to be treated. (Wong, 2009)
2. Know the students and what shapes their views. (Ferris, 2009; Smith, 2009a)
3. Actively listen with humility and respect. (Canagarajah, 2009; Purgason, 2009)
4. Give students opportunities to learn and analyze important issues. (Brown, 2009; Canagarajah, 2009; Ferris, 2009)
5. Create a classroom that demands respect. (Brown, 2009; Purgason, 2009)
6. Create opportunities to view others’ perspectives. (Brown, 2009; Canagarajah, 2009; Kubota, 2009)
7. Get comfortable with learning from students- don’t view them as culturally or spiritually deficient. (Smith, 2009b; Wong, 2009)
8. Check and recheck personal intentions and agendas. (Ramanathan, 2009)

9. Shift the focus from learning about student to learning from and with them. (Canagarajah, 2009; Giroux, 1983; Wong, 2009)
10. Give students the language to talk about their faith and beliefs with consideration of discourse structures, body language, and tone of voice. (Brown, 2009)

Conclusion

Addressing student and teacher spirituality can have a number of positive outcomes. It provides the teacher with a deeper understanding of his or her students and allows for more effective instruction. It allows the teacher to teach moral values of respect and courtesy, potentially leading to students being better global citizens and peers. There is a created opportunity for teachers and students to understand and deepen their own faith upon reflection of questions that may arise during discussion. Students gain the ability to internalize the language by speaking about things that are of importance to them. With all things in life, balance is necessary. Finding that balance in the classroom between language instruction, varied spiritual beliefs and one-sided perspectives can lead to teacher and student fulfillment.

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