

IMPROVING TEACHING METHODS: HOW LISTENING TO STUDENTS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

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There is much work concerning student voice. I have tried to develop questions to ask my students which will improve the teaching and learning within my classroom. This paper sets out a summary of my preliminary work in this area, including some examples of student response.

INTRODUCTION

I am working towards an MA in school development with Canterbury Christ Church whilst holding a full time teaching post at Tonbridge Grammar School for Girls. We are a selective school and achieve excellent results with our highly able girls. I have a Best Practice Research Scholarship (BPRS) which I am using to investigate teaching and learning in year 12. My preliminary research last year led me to the area of student voice. There is much work concerning the views of students.

“Young people are, potentially, ‘expert witnesses’ in the process of teaching and learning” (Rudduck, J et al (2000) ESRC Network Project Outline)

Last year I asked some questions of some of my classes in an effort to encourage them to think about their classroom experiences, and in particular, focusing on changes which would improve their learning. In this preliminary report on my work I will describe two of these questions, and outline the student’s response.

Without funding the only feasible method of obtaining my students’ views was to ask them to write them down. There was no class discussion and I tried to emphasise that I wanted to ensure that everyone’s voice was heard. For the future I hope to use the BPRS money to enable me to conduct interviews to follow up on some of the more interesting responses.

FIRST QUESTION SESSION

To begin with, I worked with my “bottom set” in year 9. We structure our six mathematics groups as two parallel bands, each with a “top”, “middle” and “bottom” group. Each group broadly follows the same curriculum but the “bottom” group is far smaller (22 compared to 30 at the top) and will occasionally miss out some of the more complex questions. Although within our school they are a bottom group, and their perception is of an enormous lack of understanding, they did, in fact, finish year 9 with six level 6 and sixteen level 7 in the National Curriculum SAT examinations.

Question: What makes it hard for you to learn?

When learning something new, old stuff gets pushed out of my brain.

If the teacher keeps changing their minds and seems not to know what they are talking about.

Explaining too quickly and you feel the teacher is unapproachable.

When the topic is rushed.

When other class members won't shut up and try to act cool by shouting being annoying.

When I'm hungry, bored or sleepy.

If I am told off!

This is a very rich list with lots to start me thinking. Their responses press home the need for a planned sequence of reviewing old ideas, and firmly impress the importance of the teacher appearing to know what they are talking about. There are some interesting points about managing to be approachable, but also maintaining control – preventing shouting out, suppressing the annoying and somehow telling people off in a way that still leaves them able to learn. There are clear messages here about more basic needs – not to be rushed, and on an even more basic level against tiredness and sleepiness (that dreaded last lesson before lunch feeling!).

Question: What makes it easy for you to learn?

When it is explained well.

If the teacher explains it once then I will understand it slightly, but after going over it again I will probably have picked it up quickly.

Not using the textbooks because they are confusing!

Practising

Write a simple explanation and a diagram in a separate book used for revision purposes.

When someone explains it properly and I test it out to see if it works.

Talking through things rather than writing on the board.

Explaining formulas and doing examples and going over it and a little bit of fun and games.

I'm interested now, some six months later, to try to compare my lessons with their criteria. Lots has changed anyway as things always do – but we have now implemented a “notes” book to help their revision. We've also brought in the use of individual white boards which seems to give us more opportunity for talking through things, and practising (especially the sort of practising where it is ok to get things wrong because you are going to rub them out anyway).

What is most impressive is that they are able to make intelligent comments. They appear to have the maturity and confidence to make sensible suggestions.

SECOND QUESTION SESSION

This group are quite different. A “top” set, (they were year 8 at the time of asking the questions) aiming to take GCSE a year earlier. Some very capable mathematicians, but even those without obvious “flair” are hard working and very intelligent. I wanted to get them to look at how we covered a new topic and so they turned their attention to the question “How should I teach a new topic?”. Each of the following lists are from a different student.

1. Tell us what it’s called.
2. Tell us what it’s about.
3. Give us all chocolate.
4. Tell us how to do it.
5. Tell us all the finer points
6. Now you’ll probably feel the need to give us some exercises.

Note the gentle sarcasm at the end, and the wonderful – give us chocolate. A simple sequence, involving a simple start to a more complex end....

1. Explain subject / topic in a fun and interesting way which we would remember.
2. Set no homework until we understand it (then no homework after that would be good)
3. Set questions (but not too many, and not too hard)
4. Don’t just concentrate on the same topic all the time.
5. Ask some questions during the year.

Very optimist response here. Some strange ideas about homework, but some quite lovely ideas about making things interesting and memorable at the start – and then using recapping techniques to ensure that they’ve really remembered it later.

1. Give name of topic
2. Say why it will be useful
3. Show us how it works and why it is better than other methods.
4. Show us a worked example (you do the work)
5. Help us do an example on the board.
6. Persuade us to do some on our own.
7. Redo most of this for difficult things / concepts that no-one understands.
8. Ask us to make up our own questions.

I like the attempt to force me to justify things – and explain why it will be useful – I’m not sure that this is a good plan all of the time. I like the end – a good idea as a recapping tool. (But having tried it once or twice I should add that it can give an incredible amount of marking!)

1. Explanation / Introduction: Examples and Method.
2. Do some on own / pairs from board.
3. Class complete questions set by another pupil.
4. Quiz in pairs / groups – questions set by teacher / other group (with PRIZES)
5. Write up topic on paper in best, showing that the pupil understand the topic.

6. Short, unimportant test at end.

Far more effort here to work on what happens after we've grasped it. Good ideas about quizzes, and writing up on paper – I'd worry a little about the time implications of this. Lots to worry me in the final statement. I need to do more work on the concept of an "unimportant" test.

1. Explain method simply.
2. Try some examples.
3. Set easy questions.
4. Find a game or something fun related to the topic.
5. Try harder questions.
6. Give loads of time to practice this method.
7. Give example using something / object e.g. people.
8. Tell us how it might affect our lives and when we might use it.
9. At the beginning of each lesson refresh our minds on it.
10. NOW WE KNOW WHAT WE'RE DOING. (*her emphasis*)

I like the gradual build up with this one – starting with the simple explanation and easy questions, then followed by some fun before we move on to tackling the harder questions – again a request for extra time and also some link to relevance and finally some recapping. Is there anything else that needs to be said?

SUMMARY

I believe that this preliminary work has shown that students can be trusted to show good judgement and demonstrate their wide experience of lessons.

THE WAY FORWARD

My BPRS money will make quite a difference. I am going to visit other schools and find out how student voice is being treated in other institutions. I will also be able to conduct follow up interviews with the students I teach and thus gain a far more valuable insight into what they really mean. I look forward to further gems of insight, and of course in bringing them to future BSRLM events.

REFERENCES

- Rudduck, J et al, (2000) *Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning: ESRC Network Project Outline* (unpublished), (p1)
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- Rudduck, J., Chaplain, R. and Wallace G. (1996) *School Improvement: What can Pupils Tell Us?* London: David Fulton