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EDU 275
Artifact #7

Interview and observe at least three teachers at the grade level you intend to teach. Focus on the methods and strategies they use to create a positive learning environment. How do they establish a caring environment by providing support, structure, and appropriate expectations? Report your interview [and observation] results by [writing a one-page summary per teacher].

Keith Alcock

Creating a Positive Learning Environment in Practice

The four sets of interviews and observations summarized here were conducted at Catalina Magnet High School in Tucson, Arizona during the third week of the school year, August 28-September 1, 2006. Students ranged in grade from ninth to twelfth. Numbers are used in place of teachers' names for privacy and so as not to bias the general reader's opinion based on gender and ethnic origin of the teachers. Their identities should be ascertainable from the biographical information by anyone close to the situation. Letters are used for students.

Teacher 1

Teacher 1, mentor for my current practicum, is head of the Career and Technology Education (CTE) Department. 1 has taught high school courses for approximately fourteen years. I regularly visit three different classes: Publications for Business, Technology Applications for Business, and Cooperative Business Experience (CBE). To date I have spent over 25 hours in 1's classroom. This unfortunately did not include the first day of classes when so many of the expectations are set, the structure is presented, and the tone of the class is determined. I was waylaid in the principal's office instead. He asked that I wait until the next day to start.

Support

CTE courses are significantly hands-on, involve less lecture than an average course, and make relatively little use of the textbooks. Books, in fact, do not leave the room, which unfortunately makes them unavailable for detailed study. Students work at their computers from which they request a significant amount of help. Indeed, they ask far more questions of the teacher than the teacher asks of the students. 1 and I both spend a large amount of time helping students individually with small problems. Students are also starting to help each other. This has been encouraged by the teacher, and students who have taken a course previously with 1 have been asked to lend a hand. This practice is not yet to the point of peer tutoring. There is no homework for the course and students are prohibited from bringing in diskettes or CDs from home to load onto the computer. The learning environment is limited to the classroom except for CBE students who may be learning some skills on the job. The teacher also supports students by providing tissue, blank forms for academic eligibility for sports, extra pencils, etc. All of these should really be the student's responsibility, however, and this kind of support may be a crutch.

The classroom is accessible outside of class hours. On Wednesday, the school has a conference period in the morning during which students can make up missed work or receive individual help from teachers. The classroom is open then, but every other Wednesday 1 has a department head meeting and cannot be there so that students have to enter the room through the neighboring one. This information was not made available until some students were locked out one morning. The teacher does distribute a business card with classroom phone number, cell phone number, and email address for students to use. This applies especially to the CBE students who may need to call from their co-op job. These students are also supported by one-on-one meetings. Unfortunately, many seem to have missed their initial appointments.

Structure

Assignments are specified on so-called job sheets. For example, "As a class, we will set up Exercise 2, page 53. You are to complete this exercise by following the step-by-step directions.

SC/PR/PP/P/PB Save as: Mous." At least one job sheet does state that bell work is to transcribe chapter summaries. Many students quickly finished that work, however, and standard procedure has been to enter the room and talk with friends. In other words, the time is unstructured. Teacher 1 has been encouraging students to get their folders and a book when they come in the door, but many do this afterwards as needed. A large portion of the students also skip the step-by-step directions and just look at the picture of the final document and try to recreate it. This is a valid way of doing some things, but not the desired method for these assignments, at least not yet. The teacher does not have enough oversight to know which procedure the students are following as far as I can tell. Work will be handed back shortly, so it will be interesting to see whether this has been detected. Keyboard practice is often suggested as a way to fill out an hour, but still students line up at the door and have had to be asked to get back inside. The end of the hour is not well structured.

Expectations

To participate in computer courses, students must sign a "Student User Contract" and collect a parent signature as well. It enumerates expected behaviors, e.g., "Teacher must approve Internet access." Strangely enough, signatures do not appear next to text saying, "I have read and understand this student user contract and agree to abide by the rules it sets forth." No penalty is specified and students have no say whatsoever in the content of the contract. It has been violated often, by unapproved Internet access in particular. Nevertheless, students are expected to follow these rules. There are other school wide rules, such as not to wear head phones or ear buds, which are often violated and inconsistently enforced. High school students seem keenly aware that many rules are pro forma and are not enforced. The teacher has had to have students uncover their ears in class, but does not confiscate the equipment. Punctuality is a growing expectation. During the first week, the teacher was very forgiving, but 1 has begun to send students to "tardy sweep." The teacher was unfortunately away for entire second week of school. During the first week, 1 had to get people up and running on computers and rushed through material and classroom procedures. Students worked for a week on assignments and didn't get much feedback, so it was difficult for them to judge the quality of the work that was expected. Expected classroom behavior was also not imprinted early.

Caring, Positive Learning Environment

The environment in this classroom is increasingly positive and classes are gelling. The teacher does not yet know all names yet, in part because of the week absence and because students are still switching into and out of the classroom. Knowing names would improve the atmosphere. I observed one icebreaker activity in the third week. 1 believes that that students have to get used to the teacher, classroom, and other students before they are willing to say much about themselves or appreciate others. Besides, all other classrooms are doing the same thing at the same time and that's not good. The teacher highlights students' jobs, volunteer work, and accomplishments, making them feel appreciated. At first students would not ask questions about their assignments, seeming content to struggle through or just stare at it, learning little. They are learning more now, including learning when to ask for help. One of the weakest students, S., was recently observed helping another student who had not heard the directions. This is a substantial improvement over staring blankly at the screen for minutes on end. I was sure glad to see that.

Teacher 2

Teacher 2 is a new hire this year and teaches five classes: two Career Connections, two Publications for Business, and one Technology Applications for Business. It was a morning Career Connections class that I observed. 2 spends two hours in the room adjoining 1's each morning, with a preparation hour between them, and then moves into 1's room for three afternoon classes. 2 is still enrolled in teaching courses from Northern Arizona University (NAU).

Support

Classes for teachers 1-3 are held in computer labs in which each student sits behind a computer. 2's morning room has CRT screens, tower cases on desks, and Windows 2000 Professional in contrast to 1's room with LCDs, desktop cases, and Windows XP Professional. Both have the same or very similar software installed. The hardware, software, and technical staff all support student learning. The room is open and occupied by 2 during Wednesday morning conference time and students are expected to be there if they have been absent. Even so, a student was allowed to make up a vocabulary test in class. Another student administered the test. When a student asked why they have so many tests, 2 replied, "So that I'm sure you're listening and remembering." The work of writing, administering, and grading tests is intended to support learning.

Teacher 2 cannot easily support students outside class hours. 2 has not been provided with computer access that would allow a class web page on school hardware. The phone messaging system is complicated enough that parent and students have difficulty establishing contact. Nobody knows the previous teacher's phone password, so messages cannot be retrieved remotely. 2 does check email throughout the day, however, and would like to set up an email list of students or parents and attach a newsletter or include the URL of a page of class information. Calling the 26 students/class x 5 classes worth of parents does not seem feasible. 2 estimates that 60-70% of households could be reached via email. At the time we interviewed, the teacher was still without access to attendance (Mojave) or grade book (Making the Grade) software. Parent night loomed and transparencies and handouts were the extent of what could be offered. To the other technical problems, add that the speaker system used for announcements is not working properly and bells are intermittent. I can imagine students finding it difficult to take school seriously. The school may be in more need of support than the students.

Structure

2's bell work is highly structured. It appears daily on the white board next to the bell schedule, which differs throughout the week. "Key page 7 and then make up vocabulary test" was one day's bell work. Other information appearing on the board includes the teacher's name, a general login name and password for students whose accounts are messed up, vocabulary words, and some notes. Recent vocabulary words were e-commerce and Management Information Systems (MIS). The latter definition seemed copied from a very poorly written book and must have been unintelligible to the students. Ten such vocabulary words are issued per week. The board is very full and contains little space for new information. It is located on one side of the room and faces perpendicular to the students. The teacher has little access to it since desks abut it, leaving no walkway. As with 1's classes, students have no homework and do not take books home. Review sheets can be used for outside study. 2 does sometimes call

on students who have not raised a hand. Students were allowed three days to find a seat they were comfortable with before a seating chart was made. The chart may be one reason that the teacher knows all the names and is also able to take attendance silently while bell work is being completed. The transition into the room is very smooth.

Expectations

Before taking someone aside for a vocabulary test, 2 asked if the person had studied and was prepared. The student was expected to have studied, but the teacher was concerned primarily for the student's success, not just for following the schedule. Other students were to read pp. 255-271, but as time waned, were told that skimming or scanning would suffice. Expectations are still being ironed out as the teacher learns how quickly the students can work. 2 had to confiscate a cell phone for the duration of class and said that it would go to the office for the day next time. The morning room is arranged so that the teacher can stand behind all students and easily observe what is on their screens. Unauthorized Internet access is less of a problem in this room. 2 also asks that screens be turned off at times and can verify that they are. For instruction not involving the computer, 2 moves to the front of the room so that faces can be observed; it is expected that students pay attention. Only about 50% pass the weekly vocabulary test and the teacher estimates that only 50% will pass the class. The number may be way off, but it's the current best guess, the expected value. Students now know that the teacher expects them to be in their seats when the final bell rings and not halfway to the door. 2 blocked the door until they returned to their places and started over. They would have run over me.

Caring, Positive Learning Environment

2 makes a valiant effort to engage the students in discussion rather than just lecture, which I think results in a more positive experience. When students answer incorrectly, effort is still praised. The teacher uses language that students might feel comfortable with like "That's really cool" and "You are so busted." All students' names seem to have been memorized as would be valued members of a group. 2 asked whose parents would be coming to parent night and said that the others would just have to be called instead. Responding to a student question, 2 took time to describe the situation in Vail with laptops and talked about 2's own medical transcription business, which were both on topic. A positive learning environment acknowledges and satisfies a student's curiosity.

Teacher 3

Between 2's two morning classes across from teacher 1, teacher 3 occupies the room for a Career Connections class after having taught the same subject in a different room the hour before. 3 has just returned to the classroom this year after having been athletic director and assistant principal. I suspect that the room switches are one of the reasons that the rooms are so impersonal, but another is the subject matter, and yet another is the age range of the students. Their work has probably not appeared on the local refrigerator for some years and at their own request.

Support

Students are provided with computers and accounts to support their learning. At the time of my observation the domain controller or network path to it was acting up. Students do not have

local accounts on any computer, apparently not even a guest account, so were diverted to other work as they waited to be logged on. The teacher quickly suggested ghost typing and changed that to the video. 3 has big chart on the white board for computers with "issues" including problems with power up, login, Word, Micro Type Pro, keyboard, mouse, and other. 3 is very organized and supports students by getting their computers fixed as quickly as possible. The textbook for the course is *Century 21 Computer Keyboarding and Information Processing*, which remains in the room. Volunteers handed out papers from just yesterday. Timely feedback seems to be the rule. 3 calls students back one at a time to discuss work that hasn't been completed, to hand out forms, etc. Students can be called any time and it seems like this helps keep them on task. Two students were reissued student user contracts. I would be surprised if any student could ever say, "I never got that page." In other classrooms, that claim too often interrupts and delays work. 3 helps students get the most out of every hour.

Structure

Bell work appears on the board. Not only is it obvious what to do at the beginning of class, but all instructions are very structured. Students were told to write the letters REHEAR down the side of their paper, then, "Next to each letter, write what it stands for as you come across it in the video. Also write down the ten tips to being a good listener. Then use the 'complete answer technique' to answer the question, 'What are some of the things a person can do to become a good listener?' The technique includes an introduction, three support sentences or paragraphs, and a conclusion. An example introduction is ... and an example conclusion is You can write them down. Say 'Thank you, 3, for this head start.'" Attendance was taken silently during the video with no interruption whatsoever. Teacher 3 was very good at keeping students aware of time and gave out five and one minute warnings. As students approached completion of their video notes, 3 asked them to complete their notes in the next five minutes and then key in the page from the typing book. This happened just before anyone could have finished. Several weren't done within the five minutes and brought papers up individually, so it wasn't a hard deadline, but no student ever ran out of work. The teacher's materials are as organized as the students' instructions. All work collected from students was stacked and paper clipped. Other teachers use a single turn in basket. 3 credited teacher 2 for information on the board that 3 reused. Students were given tasks for the last minute of turning off monitors, collecting garbage around their computers, closing their books, and waiting in their seats until the bell rang. This structure and organization seems to induce the same from the students. They didn't walk out in single file, but order was the rule for the day.

Expectations

There is homework for 3's class, which is uncharacteristic for the department. Only three homework assignments are issued per quarter. Students have an entire week to complete the first assignment, but the response rate is only 20-30%. For the first nine weeks, 3 is forgiving, but gets harder after that. This is in sharp contrast to those who start out very strict figuring that the standards can be relaxed more easily than tightened. 3 celebrates students who turn in homework early. C. was praised for having his completed a day ahead of time and putting it in his folder so that he wouldn't forget it. Perhaps that's the secret. Instructions were "Take out something to write with and on. While you're at it, grab your backpacks and take out your assignment. It's due now." Not much motion resulted, but the expectation was clear. Rather than telling students to get back into their seats, 3 says, "There's no need to leave your seats, folks." During our interview, a student requested a hall pass shortly just after arrival. 3 said that passes would not be given out during the first ten minutes of class. This was the first hour of the day, so the teacher expects students to come prepared. Students are supposed to place

nametags on top of monitors, but only two or three did. At one point 3 thanked those who remembered this time and asked the others to get back on the nametag kick. The teacher does well criticizing or even critiquing the action rather than the person. "It's more professional if you fill out this information so that I don't have to." "Thanks for getting underway nice and quietly." These are implicit expectations so well formulated, that I can imagine a reluctant teenager fulfilling them without realizing it.

Caring, Positive Learning Environment

Teacher 3 volunteers information from his own experience, which helps students get to know 3 and think about how the course material relates to their own lives. In explaining the importance of good listening skills, 3 described the principal's daily work that 3 had observed: admit new students, approve withdrawals, prepare for parent night, diagnose a fire alarm malfunction, deal with broken air conditioning, find someone to cover for a substitute who didn't show up. The principal doesn't do this all himself, he delegates and needs to know that people are listening. Coaches whom 3 interviewed explained how much they wanted the job, but would not listen to 3's questions and answer them. The teacher sometimes called students a very respectful "ladies and gentlemen" and was able to call most or all of students by their first names. "I see a lot of excellent work" was heard rather than "Stop that fooling around." For problem cases, the teacher reports using proximity as a tool. 3 specifically moved to one part of the room while speaking because of a potential problem and later sat down right next to a student to discuss behavior. This method seemed effective and much more positive than yelling at someone from across the room. One student new to the class was asked if he had keyboarded before. The mumbled answer amounted to no, but the teacher responded, "That's good because then you don't have any bad habits." Students are safe and secure in 3's classroom.

Teacher 4

Teacher 4 heads the math department and occupies a single room. 4 has taught math for 24 years and is nearing retirement. Were it not for a Teach for Tucson student from the University of Arizona, 4 would have retired this year. It was an Algebra I class which I observed on a Thursday, so the class was reviewing in preparation for the weekly Friday test, which would cover the entirety of chapter one. Rather than teaching a lesson, 4 fielded questions as the students worked on review exercises from the textbook. This was the largest and most traditional class I observed. Nearly 30 students filled six columns and five rows of desks.

Support

Math runs in the teacher's family. 4's spouse is also a math teacher and the teacher's son is taking calculus at another high school. 4 tells students that 4's phone number is in the book (it is) and available to them. Anyone in the house has permission to give math advice to any student who calls. This is part of the support students receive which demonstrates a caring environment. Homework help is available until 3pm at school. The classroom is equipped with a new (1 year old) touch sensitive projector screen. Students are interested enough in the screen itself to request permission to write their answers on it. Screen contents are printed out for students who were absent and converted to Portable Document Format (PDF) files and made available via the Internet for study and review by anyone in the class. In demonstrating how to access the notes and that students need to click on 4's picture, the teacher continued with the verbal bantering which is typical of the classroom: "You forget all the love I have for you guys. It's the only time you'll be able to punch me in the nose." When the projector turned on

unexpectedly, 4 danced in front of it to obscure the information until the projector could be turned off. I believe that this behavior is designed to put students at ease in a subject (math) that often provokes anxiety. Calculators are allowed starting with chapter three. There is no math lab or resource center in the school where students might get extra help during one of their free periods. Students do take their math books with them, possibly home. The teacher reports that the text does attempt to relate the material to students' lives, but that the material and schedule is all geared towards the AIMS test with little space for enrichment. At parent night the teacher tries to convince parents that there is no math gene and that their children can certainly do well in math and that they can help. There is no group work in class, unfortunately. The teacher accepted questions regarding problems already worked in class. 4 wants students to be able to ask questions and volunteer potentially wrong answers without being teased. 4's written classroom management policy specifically prohibits put downs.

Structure

Days and weeks are orderly structured and don't seem to have offered any surprises yet. The daily routine includes review of the previous day's homework, collection of homework (Don't forget name, page number, and date!), presentation of new material, and assignment of the next day's homework. There is a test every Friday, which guards against students slacking off. After three weeks of school they were preparing for the first chapter test. As students worked review problems, the teacher circulated, answered individual questions, and then solved requested problems on the board. 4 gave no strict time limits, but instead asked how many were finished. If the number was low, 4 commented, "That's OK. There are no bonus points for being the first one done." Most other teachers have let the clock determine the schedule.

Expectations

In contrast to the CTE students, math students are assigned daily homework. Since it is only worth 10% of the grade, homework is optional for many and not getting homework from a student is not surprising. Grading policy is much more detailed than in other classes. Tests are worth 45%; quizzes, 20%; homework, 10%; final, 20%; and notebook, board work, and other activities, 5%. 4 expects students to study for tests and advises them to work lots of problems (e.g., complete the homework). The handout that details the grading policy includes an unfortunate number of typos and misuses of punctuation. This may give parents and alert students a bad impression, and it causes me to doubt how thoroughly work is checked. The handout also specifies a maximum of two restroom passes per quarter. When students are in class, the teacher expects them to be in class. 4 did call on someone who hadn't raised his hand, showing that the teacher expects attention and expects that the material is understood. 4 expressed concern when one student wanted to do problems in his head and not write down the intermediate steps. He was told that might be allowed later in the year. Other expectations are simply to behave, bring the books, and be there on time. Disruptive students were called by their last names. A pair forgot their books and were given the single extra classroom copy and otherwise asked to share with someone. One student who may have been dozing was brought back to life with concerned questioning about her well being. One disruptive individual was sent outside the classroom and then reseated when he returned. In the meantime, a hall monitor had knocked and to ask if the student belonged to 4's class.

Caring, Positive Learning Environment

4 is very at ease with the students and engaged in a significant amount of verbal banter. It was the only class where I can imagine students regularly laughing, but also the only one where a

student was ejected. "You, you're late. Come here." "Just bop them on the head if they are talking." Students asked if the teacher would really sing happy birthday to them. "E. buddy, did you do the homework?" "Where's your book buddy? Bring it out. It has been stuck in that bag all day." Students were also called "ma'am," "dear," "buddy," "sweetie," "buddy boy," frequently their first names, and occasionally their last names. Put downs are prohibited, but the rule seems to apply only to math. "Did you say moped just because that's your family vehicle?" "Mr., do you have tissue? / Yes, at home. / I need some now. / Give me a quarter. / I don't have one. / It's up here." "Did you take your medication today?" These were hopefully directed at students who could easily withstand them. It seems that some are designed to get the students to open their mouths, which might increase the likelihood of math coming out of them down the line. The teacher dresses informally in shorts and tennis shoes and reports that this is for 4's own comfort, but I think that it makes the teacher and possibly the subject more approachable. The room is hung with math oriented posters including descriptions of math in Japan, Mexico, and Europe, the history of math, Fibonacci numbers, and the Pascal triangle, but nothing generated by students.