

Action Research Title: The use of kinaesthetically based learning to encourage more active participation in a classroom by Victoria Middleditch

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School, Context and Rationale:

The school in which I work is a mixed 13-18 comprehensive, currently graded as 'Outstanding' by Ofsted. The number of staff is 130, with 45 of those being non-teaching. The faculty (History, Politics, Sociology, RS and Citizenship) development plans that I devised over at least the last four years show that we have made 'learning and teaching styles' one of our areas for improvement. The schemes of work and individual lesson plans that the department have developed have progressively become more varied in the range of learning activities that we offer to those we teach. However I had one particular group, which was a year 12 mixed ability sociology, in which I found discussion was stalled.

Vygotsky argues that an important part of development and learning takes place through the 'social relationships between the teacher and learners and learners and other learners' (cited in Hramiak and Hudson, 2011: 67). Learning is not just about gaining the knowledge, but it is also about the interpretation and application of that knowledge which assist students in gaining a greater understanding. Therefore, to fully stretch themselves students need to take the information and apply it in their interactions with others. As there were students within my classroom that were not engaging in discussion with the class I was forced to question whether or not I had supported them in achieving the levels of learning they actually could through talking out their ideas and interpreting the work they have studied.

Therefore my aims and objectives soon became apparent. I decided to work to identify what factors affect an individual's level of engagement in a lesson. I then hoped to be able to identify if kinaesthetic activities can improve students participation in class. My overall objective was to achieve an increased understanding of my students, an insight into how my input in the classroom can affect them, and finally to gain some increase in the amount of participation from some of the more reluctant students.

Action:

I soon realised that the research project would be using data that was qualitative rather than quantitative. I was seeking to change attitudes and behaviour, which is not easily quantifiable. Therefore the majority of my evidence base was to be gained through conversations in group discussions and questionnaires. My first strategy was to use set focused groups (regular talkers, occasional and very reluctant engagers) to establish what the barriers to participation in class were. I also observed some lessons known to be highly participatory and kinaesthetically based (drama and English). Once the discussions and observations had taken place I undertook some one to one coaching with individual students, experimented with the learning space as well as trialling a variety of kinaesthetically based activities.

Through the interview process I had identified the main issues that led to pupils not contributing in my class. Essentially pupils fear a critical response of the answers that they give, from their teacher and their peers. What also became apparent is that some pupils did not want to learn through leading discussion as they would prefer to have the opportunity to reflect on other people's thoughts and opinions rather than process their own. Although these are quite generic issues that we would expect from the majority of reluctant participants and we can develop techniques to combat them, there are some pupils that do need more individual attention in understanding their fears and how we can quell them. Clearly the majority of the pupils in this class were anxious about their reputation and the only way they could preserve this was to participate only when they were certain of the answer. I believed that building up pupil confidence in their abilities was vitally important to increasing contributions, so I crafted activities where pupils could be almost certain of the required response as I would give them the tools to acquire the knowledge and more importantly the time to process the information so that they could feel comfortable enough to contribute.

Essentially it is also clear that each pupil will have a particular 'anxiety', some are very common, however others are more specific and by taking time to get the pupils to reflect on what is going on in their own learning they can seek out the assistance that they need to enable them to contribute more.

Therefore I must agree with constructivists such as Piaget that we should adopt a more 'child-centered' approach in our planning, and once we understand the pupils individual needs we can cater the activities specifically to the individual.

I employed a number of strategies:

- Think, pair and share
- Increased pairing and sorting card activities
- Cartoon animations / puppets (students were putting forward ideas without directly speaking)
- Movement from didactic class setting with tables and chairs to a studio theatre with all sitting on the floor in a circle

From the evidence I gathered it was clear that I had managed to improve the participation of many of the class members. However, participation did not clearly equate to enjoyment. I agree with Gardiner as I believe that when presenting an activity to a pupil that does not appeal to their individual learning style we can gain their participation, but we cannot gain their enthusiasm for it. There was one pupil who did not 'enjoy' the activities. In her final questionnaire she had stated that she had been more involved in lessons, but she didn't 'enjoy role play' and would have felt 'more comfortable doing a poster' so she would not 'be singled out'. Another pupil commented to me that the questionnaire asked if pupils had contributed in an activity and that this was 'stupid, because it actually forced me to Miss'. This was supported in a response from one of the pupils in the class who rarely ever contributed who stated that although she had participated more, she had not enjoyed lessons anymore, but 'we had more activities where we had to contribute'. This seems to support the idea that students will engage if the activity is right, however they won't always like it. Essentially the activities that I crafted were aimed at gaining full participation in class and they achieved this. Part of our role as a teacher is to move students beyond their comfort zone, and the activities certainly did this for a number of students.

I must agree with Edward and Furlong that the organisation of a room can break down or form barriers which can affect participation levels. A formal didactic approach to teaching may work very well in terms of management of pupils and monitoring of learning, however it is not the best organisation of a class I you want to get them to participate. It would be unrealistic of me to move all my lessons in to such a space. This project has been focused on my preparing pupils for next year, and essentially my usual teaching objective is to prepare pupils for their exam, where they will need to perform in the very traditional written method, therefore they have to be trained within these surroundings to perform in the required manner. However what I do need to do in my practice is to work to change the environment I am in. Possibly moving the furniture in my classroom for a period of time, or even just certain lessons over the period of teaching to allow pupils into a less formal environment where they all believe they have the right to speak. It could be as simple as creating group tables of forming 'circle time' to discuss thoughts every so often. As the project developed I moved into recognising the big impact that the structure of an environment can have upon students and hope to explore this further in the future.

Learning:

What has become evident from this action research project is that students will contribute at different levels, due to a number of factors, including self-perceptions, classroom environment, expectations of others and teacher responsiveness. The only way to enable students to overcome this is through allowing them to analyse their own place in classroom and coaching them through how they wish to move forward into becoming more actively involved. Part of the process does involve taking them out of their comfortable learning style, however if the students can see the reasoning for the activity and the wider implications for their personal development, then this can be most beneficial. This project served not only to develop my own practice, but also enhanced my students learning to the point that

one, in their feedback, reported that they had “been held back” by an issue which I had helped her to realise and which ultimately has led to an improvement in her general class participation and confidence.

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