Teaching What You Know to Someone Else

Recently I heard Lee Shulman (1989) say that Bloom didn’t go far enough with his taxonomy. There’s another level of knowledge, he asserted, the level necessary for teaching what you know to someone else, where you know enough to bridge between your knowledge and the student’s experience. He went on to establish the seamless interchange between content and pedagogy—and I’m not sure I have the level of knowledge to explain that just now—but suddenly I pictured the high school classrooms where, in the fall of 1984, I received training in the Tennessee Instructional Model (T.I.M.). Nearly everyone in my system had signed up to prove we were on the “cutting edge” of school reform, to make Level I status on the career ladder, that is, $1,000, and to get the nice certificates with our names on them.

The governor was in a hurry to get every educator in the state trained in T.I.M., so the state department selected a pyramid plan, and the first round of volunteers went to Nashville to receive two weeks of intensive training. They soon returned to their districts with complete sets of modules carefully organized in three-ring binders. Quickly they trained dozens more, who trained dozens more, and so on.

The training modules had been written by professionals with excellent credentials, though not necessarily scholars in any field. The local trainers were respected teachers, supervisors, and principals who knew “what it’s like in a classroom.” All deeply desired to move Tennessee’s reforms to their full potential.

However, in the sessions I attended, the trainer typically read from a script, failed to answer questions unless they were explicitly addressed in the script, and did not make reading or writing assignments. Allowing myself to be “trained” under these circumstances, I found it difficult to maintain my self-respect, but T.I.M. was now the basis of teacher evaluation, my friends were there, and I had bills to pay. But the training sessions had nothing to do with intellectual growth. Having only the script to go on and the clock to watch made dialogue, reflection, and study impossible.

Maybe the pyramid plan succeeded for those who trained in Nashville, but most of us were like the youngest child in the hillbilly family in one of my dad’s stories. Seems the whole family took sick, and they had only one red pill in the bottle, so they tied a string around the pill and, starting with the oldest, took turns swallowing it and pulling it back up. Naturally the pill faded from red to pink and nearly to white. By the time the pill got to the youngest child, it was bleached white, having entirely lost its strength, so that, sad to say, he did not survive. The content of my T.I.M. training was as diluted as that bleached pill.

The supreme irony in all this was that the very reformers who now gave us T.I.M. had sharply criticized teacher preparation in our state as lacking intellectual rigor. So what did the reformers provide? Trainers without comprehensive knowledge of any field, a training process hastily conceived and mechanically executed, and important content reduced to a collection of little algorithms.

Driving home after those training sessions, I pondered the question of intellectual rigor. I compared T.I.M. training to my days at the university: the practicums, the lectures, the papers, the library assignments, the residence requirements, the colleagues, and the rare worthy profs we could argue with. Those profs had the other level of knowledge, the one necessary for teaching us about teaching. Five years after T.I.M., I know Shulman is right.

Reference


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