

One big step closer to be a professional teacher

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### **One big step closer to be a professional teacher**

“Mr. Wu, why do you unfriend us on Facebook, aren't we good friends? Have we done something wrong that upset you, please befriend us” These were part of the comments from my students four years ago. Here was the scope: I found out that some of my students were trying to hit on me and gossiping about me behind my back after I became friends with them on Facebook. I unfriended them immediately and did not know what else I could do. My mentor teacher told me that I need to keep a good relationship with my students, meanwhile, keep distance from students, what did he mean by that? How could I strike a balance between the two? This was part of the struggles and confusions I had during my prior teaching. Luckily, the course of Analysis of Teaching I took this semester provides me with lots of important theories and helpful practices in teaching that I could refer to dispel my confusions, besides, group discussions, presentations, and the observations in local school and interviews with the teacher (Ms. Harlan) exposed me with more hands-on teaching experiences.

I will draw a comparison between my prior misconceptions in teaching and my new, modified learnings and understandings from this course, and expand on my new learnings via my reflections and thoughts on my vision of good teaching.

#### **My vision of good teaching**

I think that good teaching is to adopt the differentiated instruction to accommodate the specific learning needs of students. Differentiated instruction is a way of looking at instruction that is centered on the belief that students learn in many different ways (Smith & Throne, 2009). To put it in another way, students learning abilities, reading interests and pace of reading vary considerably, therefore, it make sense that they learn and read differently. The adoption of uniform reading instruction won't work and may stifle students' interests in learning and reading.

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In Ms. Harlan's class, she provided the differentiated instructional content and activities to help students of different math levels to master the abstract math terms and the solutions to the math problems. The improved results of math quizzes, and the positive feedback from her students convinced me of the benefits of differentiated instructions.

Good teaching should conform to the social constructivism theory and the problem-posing education (Friere, 2009), during which, students' learning should be achieved via reciprocal communications and interactions with teachers and peers. I observed this practice of teaching not only through Ms. Harlan's class and other classes, but also via the classes I took in Peabody College. The similarities of these classes sharing are the student-centered instructions, replete with lectures, students' presentations, discussions, class observations and interviews. Teachers and students assume roles of instructors and learners simultaneously, construct meaning and solve problem through discussions and interactions. For instance, during my discussions with Dr. Hostetler and Courtney, I got a better understanding of how the American education system works and its problems; meanwhile, my Chinese cohort students' presentations informs Dr. Hostetler and other American classmates of Chinese education system and its own problems. Sometimes, we were divided into different groups and did the brainstorming the ideas on certain topics via the poster and screen shots, which made me very involved in thinking and learning, not only from the course instructors and cohort students' wonderful ideas and conversations, but also from my own thinking and perspectives.

Good teaching, instead of uniform and generalizable, is subjective, personal and evolving (Alsup, 2006). I learn this through my own education and the class observations I did. For instance, both the math class I took before about "slope" as well as Ms. Harlan's class on "slope" was easy to understand and very engaging. However, the math class I had was the teacher-

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centered; while Ms. Harlan's was student-centered. From students' perspectives, both classes were considered to be good and effective. Two reasons could account for this: one is due to the influence of the long-established educational system, and the ingrained typical teaching style that the teachers and students have already approved and got used to. Another reason would be that teachers' vision of good teaching and capabilities in teaching is quite different. Besides, owing to the students' motivations, learning capabilities, class participations, even the same instructional contents would be modified and delivered in a different way by teachers to accommodate students' learning needs.

**The critical issues I have wrestled with and the significant questions that emerged**  
**Teacher identity and discourse**

Before I took this course, I did not know that the teacher's identity could be classified as identity by nature, institution, discourse and affinity. These identities involve embodying the discourse of teacher and needs to be developed systematically (Gee, 2001). To be frank, I have no idea how to develop these identities systematically for a teacher, nor have I received the relevant training before. But I do know it's a common sense for an adult that people have multiple identities and responsibilities to fulfil. However, there is no clear-cut demarcation line between these identities. Teachers need to be able to distinguish the differences of these identities, and live up to the expectations of these roles respectively. For instance, my institution and discourse identity make me talk and act like a teacher in school: tough, serious-looking, strict with students; however, I am an easygoing, jolly and jovial person to my family and friends by nature identity. Affinity identity makes me known as one of the eloquent debate members and formidable badminton players to my competitors. I found that these four different identities are interconnected and influenced by each other. Sometimes, I did not know how to make a clear

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distinction between these different identities in teaching and daily lives. In China, teachers are expected to be serious-looking and tough on students, while I am not that kind of person by nature identity. During my teaching and debating, I always forget that I should be tough and aggressive; instead I was nice and friendly to students and competitors, which would make students and competitors take advantage of me, and make my teaching and debating difficult to do. I am always wondering how I could balance the different roles under the different and the same circumstance. Do I want to be friends with my students, and challenged by them? Or will I follow strictly with my identity responsibilities and be tough on them? Which one is good for my teaching and my students? I need more teaching and life experience to figure that out in the future.

### **Relationship with students**

During my prior teaching, I always attempted to establish a good relationship with students. Though my mentor teacher warned me that I need to be tough and keep a distance with my students. Fortunately, I did have established meaningful relationships with my students most of the time. Occasionally I ran into incidents and rough patches with them. For instance, the small incident I cited at the beginning of the paper is a case in point. I learned from Jimenez and Rowe (2010) that to establish a good relationship with students is very crucial to the classroom instruction and students' engagement in learning. My class observations and interviews with Ms. Harlan also inform me that the key to successful teaching and learning is to build a good relationship with students in the first place. Ms. Harlan added that her students will test her whether she cares about them or not, if without winning trust from her students, she could not conduct teaching effectively in class. However, I kept asking myself one question: is it necessary to build a good relationship with students? Being strict with students in teaching not equal to

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doing the best for them? In my opinion, students are teenagers or even younger. They are not mature in cognitive abilities, nor do they know what is good for them and what takes them to be successful learners in academic studies. Though some students know, they are still teenagers and may lack of self-discipline and resources to realize their goals. Thus I think that teachers need to be tough and do what's best for the students, even sometimes, it might hurt students' feelings for the time being. If teachers and students are too close to each other, they may lose their authority and respect from students. Students may take advantage of the relationship and fool around in their studies.

Another perplexing question is that how could we stay professional and be fair to every student without being influenced by personal feelings? Sometimes teachers and students would have the feelings that they may like or dislike each other when they met for the first time in class. Both parties would change their attitudes toward each other with the deepening of their understandings and communications. However, it's not easy to change people's first impressions. Teachers can't either, regarding the change of attitudes towards students. I find it almost impossible for me to stay fair with every student; maybe I would be nice and friendly to every student on the surface. However, how could I rid of personal feelings and be fair to the students who I don't like?

### **Model of teacher knowledge**

During my prior teaching, I held the opinion that the subject matter knowledge and the knowledge of context are the only essential knowledge a teacher needs to know to deliver quality instruction. While it is not the whole picture, according to the Grossman' Model of Teacher Knowledge (1990), in addition to the subject matter knowledge and the knowledge of context, teachers also need to know the general pedagogical knowledge and the pedagogical content

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knowledge. These four types of knowledge are intertwined and interrelated to each other. A qualified teacher should be the one that could apply this knowledge comprehensively and dexterously to their instructions. For instance, Ms. Harlan has a good grasp of math knowledge and knows well how to manage her class. While she comments that she is far from being a good teacher. Her vision of ideal teacher coincides with me. In our minds, good teacher should be the person with multiple expertises: a guru knowing various kinds of effective instructional approaches, an expert in communications and people skills, a psychologist in knowing how to motivate and engage students in learning, and a people person that knows how to reach out to parents and communities to solicit support and participation. I think that to be an ideal teacher may take years of teaching and researching experience, besides; the regular training and seminar on the latest development in teaching theories and methodologies are also an indispensable part of teacher learning and training.

### **Lens for analysis of teaching**

During my prior teaching, I had observed and analyzed many classes of my colleagues to learn how to teach effectively. I had benefited considerably from the class observations and the analysis of their teaching. Looking back, I found that my previous analysis was biased and superficial; it mainly focused on the specific instructional approaches without taking students' feedback into account, not to mention the utilization of different lens for analysis. These different lenses could approach the instruction and learning from diverse point of view, and provide us with different perceptions on teaching and learning. For instance, I would use the teachers' identities, PCK, teachers' beliefs and metaphors, and teacher's relationship with students to analyze the teaching and learning. This multiple-dimensional perspective would give me more fresh eyes to view the same problems, and make my understanding of teaching more thorough

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and accurate. Meanwhile, it could also offer me more inspirations and solutions to the current teaching problems, and usher me in more new unknown areas of sustainable learning and researching.

### **What I could do in the future instruction**

In my current teacher preparation program, Grossman's Model of Teacher Knowledge would be one of my goals that I will strive to attain. The mastery of it would be just the first step. How to modify it accordingly and apply it flexibly into my future instruction would be a daunting task that I need to meet in the future. Another factor that I need to be aware of is that, as a teacher, I need to keep learning, not just from the academic books and journals, but also need to gain more relevant first-hand experience from class observations, interviews with teachers and students, tutoring and student teaching. In particular, learn from professors and veteran teachers how to engage students in the content learning and train students' higher-order thinking skills. The pursuit of quality instruction is an ongoing process, I need to adopt effective instructional methods and activities that could activate students' prior knowledge, design the appropriate curriculum, and adopt creative instructional approaches to better accommodate students' specific learning needs and prepare them for the future study.

Meanwhile, I need to create a friendly and comfortable learning environment that open to students' challenges and questions, so they would feel confident and in control in their learning, besides, expose them to more authentic learning materials and environment to engage their interests and identities in learning. Last but not least, I should also serve as a resource and liaison between the parents, communities and school, and involve parents into my teaching and students' learning. Make sure students would get the multi-dimensional support and monitor from different parties.



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