

Anna Kremnyova: Are staff involved in the teaching of students qualified and competent to do so?

Before I start answering this question I would like to stress on the importance of education and its quality. I do suppose that quality of education depends not only on students, their willing to learn, to know more, but also on teachers. I have been learning in the Academy of Foreign Trade almost for three years and I would like to share my experience.

When I was entering this academy I was told that it cannot provide students with all necessary materials, but I still wanted to study there. And talking to my future teachers during exams I realized that I should enter this Academy if I want to be taught by real professionals!

Maybe our Academy is not always able to buy some new equipment for our classrooms but it provides comprehensive education in a secure environment of mutual respect and understanding.

To my mind, an enriched and supportive environment is so important that none of the other techniques will be really effective unless the issues of enrichment and support are addressed first. In a world full of broken relationships, broken promises and broken hearts, a strong supportive relationship is important to students.

We are taught the skills needed for successful living in a world. I can't help admiring our teachers who work in order to enable students to develop self-confidence, ability to work cooperatively with others, commitment to learning. Our students understand their individual rights and responsibilities. We learn to think critically, to respect ourselves, to adapt to change, to question and hold authority, government and ourselves to high ethical and educational standards. We are taught to welcome diversity and human differences.

Our teachers try to prepare us for a complex fast-changing world of technological growth, mutual ambiguity and sometimes instant social upheaval. They use many different teaching strategies, trying to provide best teaching practices.

Now I would like to tell you the recipe of our teachers' success. It includes a lot of components. One of them is creating environment that facilitates learning. It means that they try to stress on the personal importance of the learning to the students. Of course, no one will argue that learning is important. However, for learning to be addressed by the brain, it must be perceived as important to the individual. The first criterion is that the student must believe that learning satisfies a personal need or goal. A lot of teachers have heard the students say: "When are we ever going to use this?". Our teachers understand that students today are in overload on information so they try to help students to see the importance of the learning to them personally. This personal importance may be viewed in many ways, e.g. personal goals that address immediate needs, personal goals that increase the esteem of the student to a particular group, personal goals that are long term in nature (when students may not see the relevance of studying slope in their immediate lives, but realize that they must know this information in order to get a good job).

Besides, teachers develop self-efficacy in the learner, which is even more powerful than self-esteem, because self-esteem is based on a feeling or belief about oneself that may or may not have been proven: I may believe that I can do work even though I have never tried it before. And self-efficacy is based on fact: I know that I can do more difficult math assignment because I have had success with math before. This is one of the reasons why our teachers want our students to experience success – even incremental success – in the classroom. Success really does breed success! So they try to provide opportunities for it.

Also teachers of our academy build capacity in students by providing adequate directions and opportunities to practice the learning. Of course, they encourage students to develop their own goals for the learning and try to provide students with the expectations for the learning up front, before the learning begins. The main goal of our teachers is to build a brain-friendly environment and provide

the sense of empowerment.

As a conclusion, I can say that our teachers acknowledge that all learning begins in the self-system of the brain, so they try to utilize processes in the classroom that help facilitate self-efficacy, positive climate and adequate challenge, so that our students are motivated to learn.

Besides, our teachers differentiate with a variety of teaching strategies that address different teaching styles: individual and group-projects, problem-solving activities.

They try to use strategies that help students to make connections from prior learning and experiences to new learning across disciplines. Our teachers do not assume that students come to them with the necessary structures in place to make the necessary connections to new information and across disciplines. They first find out what we know, what misinformation we have about the subject, and, where no structures exist, create structures for the new information. Besides, our teachers do not assume that transfer will automatically occur after students acquire a sufficient base of information. They know that significant and efficient transfer occurs only if they teach to achieve it.

Teachers of our academy use different factors in order to teach students: association, similarity, comparison and critical attributes. Association helps to provide a personal connection, because it is the process of providing a hook or connection that makes the learning personal. Personal or association connection is based on the association of past experience, past knowledge, or, in the event that there no past experiences, on the associations teachers create. It is the process of going from the known to the unknown. This is one of the ways that teachers help students to bridge the new-learning gap. Teachers sometimes refer back to previous lessons if the information to be studied requires the prerequisite of the information from the previous lesson. When there is no previous lesson from which to draw, our teachers create the hook with personal experiences the students may have had. Personal or association connection is the piece that gives ownership to the learning process.

Similarity is used when students do not have exact prior knowledge or experience to connect to the new learning. In this case, the new information is related to something similar we already understand personally.

Comparison is the way in which we identify the similarities and the differences between two or more things. So our teachers try to make students being able to compare and contrast.

Critical attributes are also very important. They can be defined as characteristics that make one idea unique from all others. It can help students to identify how things are different.

Teachers employ techniques that pique student interest and that motivate students to know more.

Also, our teachers use one of the best teaching practices which can be called constructing knowledge through higher-level thinking processes. As far as we know, we live in an age of tremendous information that changes rapidly; if students are to be successful in life they must move beyond factual input to the processes involved in higher-level thinking, such as problem-solving, decision making, experimental inquiry and investigation. Our teachers want to move students from the simple to the complex.

We are taught to use critical thinking – ability to analyze, to create and use objective criteria and evaluate data, which includes inductive, deductive and evaluating thinking skills; creative thinking – the ability to use complex thinking structures to produce new and original ideas; problem-solving – the ability to utilize complex thinking to solve real problems. Such activities consist of different steps, such as identifying the problem, analyzing it, formulating a hypothesis and appropriate questions, generating ideas, developing alternative solutions, determining the best solution, applying the solution, maintaining and evaluating the solution and drawing conclusions.

Induction and deduction are also among the most important higher-level skills to assist students to make informed decisions about their world not only at this time but also in the future. So our teachers try to teach us these higher-order skills that can be employed to specific facts throughout

life.

The thing is that when higher-order thinking skills are the part of the learning students use more complex thinking processes. Critical thinking, creative thinking and problem-solving are encouraged and rewarded. Our teachers try to filter the material to be studied so that low-level and extraneous information are kept at minimum to allow time for processing, more complex skills. To the extent possible, student products and assessments should be at the analysis level or above. Inductive thinking skills, such as distinguishing cause and effect and making inferences are the part of a lesson. Students are also provided with opportunities to use deductive thinking skills, such as logic and syllogistic thinking. All students get a unique opportunity to work at higher levels, not just students, identified as fast learners.

Now, let me say few words about collaborative learning: it is an integral part of our classes. It is really important because collaboration is more than just working together in groups; it is the whole communication process, communication not only among students, but also between teachers and students.

Next component is evaluating learning through a variety of authentic assessments. Our teachers understand that good assessment should reflect both declarative and procedural information. Declarative objectives are based on what students will know as a result of the teaching and learning process and procedural objectives include students` need to know what they do with this theoretical knowledge. So we are given assessments in which we can show the level of understanding of knowledge given us during lectures. Students are given different problem-solving tasks in order to learn how to act in different situations. For example, at home we have not only to read a law, but also to think about some problems concerning its implementation or its use. Sometimes we are asked to write a contract or to prepare some other documents in a proper way, so they meet special requirements of the international law. It is rather interesting and useful to write an official document and then – talk it over. It leads to better understanding and ability to improve your knowledge of the subject.

So I can admit that our teachers try to apply real-world applications to the learning, so our knowledge is connected to authentic situations that occur outside the classroom as well as within. We strongly believe that theory is nothing without practice and students should be taught how to use their knowledge in real life. Our teachers try to teach us in such a way that we could combine globalized and expert knowledge, so we could understand the impact of the knowledge beyond our immediate world. We understand the impact to our community, country, world and planet. This type of learning is more likely to stay with the student throughout life – not just for the test on Friday. We see things from other points of view and have a better understanding of the value of the information and processes that we have acquired. Our students are taught to have the ability to accept feedback and put it to use.

At last I would like to say about the main ingredient of success – putting it all together! It is really important to be able to combine all of those teaching practices and try to keep the balance needed for achieving success. In order to be successful, students have to be able to balance their analytical, practical and creative thinking.

So taking everything into account I want to answer the question stated above: yes, I strongly believe that stuff of our academy involved in the teaching of students qualified and competent to do so. Of course, sometimes, our teachers make mistakes, but they try to do their best in order to improve. Despite all their failures, they are great artists, because they can turn strangeness into familiarity, coldness into warmth and indifference into understanding...