IMPROVING STUDENTS' LEARNING BY INVOLVING THEM IN THE DESIGN OF THE COURSE

By Doris Correa

Este artículo da cuenta de una experiencia de aprendizaje colaborativo. Narra cómo un grupo de estudiantes universitarios participó en el diseño de su curso y evaluó los resultados de este proceso. Tuvieron que reflexionar y analizar las decisiones tomadas, discutir qué acciones permitieron el buen desarrollo de esta experiencia y por qué.

Palabras claves: aprendizaje colaborativo, relaciones profesor-estudiante, resolución de problemas, toma de decisiones, autonomía de los estudiantes.

Cette expérience qui s'inscrit dans le cadre de l'apprentissage coopératif, décrit comment un groupe d'étudiants universitaires a élaboré le programme du cours, puis évalué les résultats issus de ce processus. Pour cela, ils ont dû mettre en commun leurs réflexions sur les décisions prises afin d'en analyser les effets et suggérer d'autres plans d'actions.

Mots-clés: apprentissage coopératif, relations professeur-étudiant, résolution de problèmes, prise de décisions, autonomie des étudiants.

This collaborative learning experience narrates how a group of university students was involved in the design of their course and how they also took part in evaluating the results of this process. To do so, they had to reflect back upon the decisions made and discuss which actions had the best effects and why.

Key words: cooperative learning, teacher-student relationship, problem-solving, decision-making, learners autonomy.

Reflecting upon our teaching practice may be something we teachers do everyday, but it is also a process that we usually undertake by ourselves, without involving students in it. We think it is our obligation to revise the programs for our courses, see if they fit our students' needs and wants and make modifications where these are needed. If well it is true that most institutions nowadays expect teachers to assume the roles of "needs analysts", "curriculum designers" and "material developers", among others, it is also true that teachers should see themselves as "empowerers". Assuming this last role implies letting "students make decisions about what they want to learn and how they want to learn it" (Richards & Lockhart, 1994:106). In other words, it implies involving students in the design of the program or syllabus.

Negotiating the program with the students is not an easy task. It implies a lot of time and effort which many teachers may not be willing to devote. It also implies postponing decisions about what to study, when and how, which teachers usually take on their own and have ready for the first day the students come to class. However, the arguments for negotiation are so

Do-it-yourself (1962)
Andy Warhol

many that it is worth the effort.

In the following paragraphs I will discuss the reasons why it is important to involve students in the design of the curriculum, the different ways we can use to involve students in this process and the ways we have to evaluate the results of our actions.

WHY INVOLVE STUDENTS IN THE DESIGN OF THE CURRICULUM?

Involving students in the design of the curriculum has a lot of positive implications for both teachers and students. Those implications have to do with concepts related to autonomous learning such as decision making, responsibility (Sinclair, 1997), evaluation (Trim, 1997), motivation
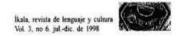
(Kernerman, 1997), cultural and linguistic awareness, cooperation, self-esteem and self-confidence (Trim, 1997), and with concepts related to social skills such as teacher- student relationships or rapport (Kernerman, 1997). To focus the discussion only on the most relevant aspects, I will just mention the first four aspects related to autonomy and the aspect related to social skills. To make the analysis more systematic, I will first present the aspects that have to do directly with teachers.
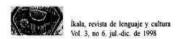
IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

These are almost the same as the implications for students, only that in most cases teachers have to stop being in charge, so that students can begin to take charge. The implications are the following.

1. Decision making: Teachers no longer have to break their heads deciding everything that concerns the course by themselves, they can and should bring some proposals to class as to what topics to include, how to work with them and how to assess them, but the final decision should be made jointly.

2. Responsibility: Teachers will no longer be responsible for all the good and bad things that happen in the classroom. If decisions are made by both students and teachers, the responsibility for the positive or negative consequences will be shared by both parties as well.

3. Evaluation: Teachers no longer have to fear students' evaluation because when students evaluate the course they will be evaluating their own decisions and behavior, not only the teachers'.

4. Lack of motivation: Although this seems to be more a students' than a teachers' problem, we cannot deny the fact that teachers sometimes do not feel motivated to teach some subjects. Mostly if it is a subject they have already taught several times because they already know the program by heart. When this happens, involving students in the design of the course is a good way to make the idea sound more appealing since the students will surely come with new ideas on what to do and how to do things in the course to make it more fun and interesting for everyone.

5. Teacher-student relationships: When students realize that the decisions concerning the course are not being imposed to them but consulted with them, they will stop seeing the teacher as an authority figure they have to obey and sometimes fear and will begin to regard him/her as a person who they can criticize, but also support and help, a friend they can put their trust in. Positive teacher-student relationships "are associated with more positive student responses to school [...] and with increased academic achievement" (Jones, 1990:64).

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS

Although related to almost the same aspects, the implications for the students are different from the ones for the teachers.

1. Decision making: In our culture students are not used to making decisions by themselves. They are used to be told what to do, how to do it and when to do it. Teachers complain that when students are given the chance to say something they will not say anything. They do not do it simply because they are not used to doing it. Never before had students been consulted on what to do in a class, how to do it or how to assess their work. This is part of the new trends in education that go counter-clockwise to the old ones. Students, then, need to be given time and a lot of motivation to accommodate to the new idea. In the beginning, they should also be given some possibilities to choose from so that the task of deciding everything for themselves does not become so difficult for them.

If decisions are made by both students and teachers, the responsibility for the positive or negative consequences will be shared by both parties as well.

2. Responsibility: Since students are not used to making decisions, they are not used to being responsible for whatever happens in the classroom or for what happens with their learning. Students are used to blaming their teachers for their faults. Even nowadays, we find many students saying that they do not know something because they were not taught that in previous courses, because their teacher was very bad, because he/she did not make him/her-self understood, etc. When we negotiate the program with our students they realize that whatever happens in that course is not only our responsibility but that they will also have responsibility for it.
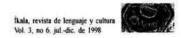
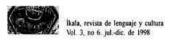**3. Evaluation**: In many institutions in our country students are asked to evaluate their teachers' work, but not their own work. To judge how they performed in the course is a task students do not want to do. They want the teacher to tell them how they performed because, according to them, they cannot be objective when judging themselves. But if evaluating your own work is hard, it is even harder to evaluate other persons' work. There are many things we may overlook when we do this. Students know much more than we do. They know, for example, the problems they had, and the reasons why they performed in a certain way and therefore are better equipped to evaluate their performance in class. Besides, as Little (1991:52) so nicely put it, "the learner should develop his capacity to reflect critically on the learning process, evaluate his progress and, if necessary, make adjustments to his learning strategies."

Before asking students to evaluate their performance it is necessary, however, that students have a clear idea of which aspects to consider. These aspects or parameters can be defined with the help of the teacher

Campbell's soup cans (1961-1962)
Andy Warhol

and can take the form of questions such as how was your participation in group? How was your individual participation in class? How many hours did you dedicate to the studying of English outside of class? General questions such as "what do you think of your performance in this class?" would not be appropriate since students will not know what to say or they will answer with monosyllables such as "good", "so, so" and so on. The purpose of these parameters or questions would be to make the task easier and more objective for the students.

Involving students in the design of the curriculum and in the solution of the problems may not be very easy in the beginning. Students may be reluctant to tell us all the problems they see with the classes.

4. Lack of Motivation: This is, to me, the cause of most of the problems we have in our courses resistance to learn, indiscipline, lack of attention, lack of responsibility, scarce participation and absences. If this were so, most of those problems would be solved with an appropriate motivation that could begin the first day of class by proposing students to play an active role in the making of all the decisions that concern the course. In fact,

at the end of the course, students who participated in an investigation carried out by Correa (1998) at Universidad de Antioquia were far more attentive, participant and responsible.

Involving students in the design of the curriculum and in the solution of the problems may not be very easy in the beginning. Students may be reluctant to tell us all the problems they see with the classes. They may fear the teacher will stop liking them or will bear a grudge on them because of what they have said, much more so if their comments on the problems they see have to do directly with us, the teachers. However, if we show them we are really interested in knowing their opinion, and we assure them nothing of the kind will happen, students will begin to feel more confident to talk. They will realize they have nothing to lose and a lot to gain by telling us honestly how they feel about the course.

Not long after this, they will begin to make suggestions about what topics to include in the course, what methodology and form of assessment to use, and how to solve the problems that

may arise. An example of this can be seen in the investigation conducted by Correa (1998) where students were asked to keep a journal in which they could make comments on the classes, their classmates, the methodology and form of assessment used, and any other thing they considered worth mentioning. In the beginning they did not write very risky comments, they just wrote what had taken place in class and how much they had understood.

> "We made the correction of the workshop about -ED/ING and I can understand this topic now. After, we talked about compounding. Finally, we worked in little groups about compounding."

As time went by and students became more reflective and less afraid to express their feelings and ideas, the nature of their comments varied. At the end of the course students were writing things such as
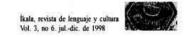
> "If you want to know about how I feel I can tell you that I have understood a lot of things I haven't known. I know that I am the one who is responsible of learning, so I must work hard."
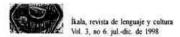
> "I want to tell you a constructive critic. If it is possible to you write on the whiteboard a little bit orderly it would facilitate to take notes".

HOW TO INVOLVE STUDENTS IN THE DESIGN OF THE CURRICULUM?

Once we have decided to involve students in the design of the curriculum and in the solution of the problems, we have to decide how we are to do it. We may think we have to wait until the semester or the academic year begins to be able to do something, but this is not so. Most of the times we teachers are told well in advance what courses we have to take the following semester and we are presented with the program for the course. Even if we have the program for the course in our hands telling us which is the content methodology and form of assessment to follow during the semester, negotiation of those three aspects would be necessary.

As important as programs are in the curriculum so that teachers can have a guide as to which objectives should be achieved with the course and what methodology and form of assessment the institution recommends, they should not become straight jackets to us. If we want to take into account our students needs and wants, programs should be flexible and allow for modifications according to the particular

needs and wants of the specific group we have. "[...] the curriculum is not just a document but also an activity, the interpretation and implementation of the ideas in the document" (Murphy 1996:25).

To find out which our students' needs and wants are and to have a program that really corresponds with them there are several actions we can take. Those actions include documenting ourselves on what students are studying in other courses and the way they evaluated their previous course, interviewing teachers who have taught the course before, interviewing students who have taken the course, having informal talks with them, having them complete questionnaires and asking them to write journals. In the following paragraphs I will only analyze those actions that involve students directly.

1. Interviews to students: Most of the times when we are going to have a course for the first time we, teachers, are advised to go and talk with the teacher who had it previously to get some recommendations from him/her as to how to conduct the course. However, we never think of talking to the students who took the course about the assets of the course or the aspects that might be improved. Talking to students before the course begins can give us a pretty good idea of what it is that our students need and want.

In the investigation done by Correa (1998), students who had previously taken the English Grammar Course were asked, among other things, what their feelings about the course were and what aspects of the course could be improved. This gave the teacher-researcher the possibility to plan changes for the course she was to begin the following semester.

The advantage of interviewing students over having them complete a questionnaire is that "interviewers can follow up ideas, probe res-ponses and investigate motives and feelings which the questionnaire can never do. The way in which a res-ponse is made (the tone of voice, facial expression, hesitation, etc. can provide information that a written response would conceal. Questionnaire responses have to be taken at face value, but a response in an interview can be developed and clarified" (Bell, 1993:91).
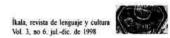
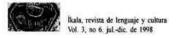**2. Informal talks**: Informal talks should begin the first day of class and should continue throughout the semester. The first day of class, students can be given different "choices". These choices may have to do with time, goals, mode (methodology), content, evaluation and guidance (Littlejohn, 1985:255). These choices can then be compared to the ones proposed in the program for the course and adjustments can be made so that the general aims of the curriculum and the students' needs and ideas are taken into account.

Negotiating the program with the students at the beginning of the course is not enough, however. Both students and teachers can make the wrong decisions concerning any of these aspects and problems may arise during the semester which may imply these decisions to be revised. Unexpected events can also take place and "interactive decisions" may be needed (Richards and Lockhart, 1994:83). To cope with this demand, a continuous dialogue must be esta-blished between the students and the teacher. This dialogue can take the form of informal talks every two, three or four classes. In them, students can express their feelings about the classes, the problems they have had with the lessons in and outside the classroom and so on. They can also be given the chance to propose some activities to practice the lesson and the way to assess their performance or to check their progress.

3. Questionnaires: The same kind of questions that can be asked informally, can be asked in a questionnaire, only that "the insight gained with the help of a questionnaire is often much smaller than expected" (Altrichter et al., 1993:111). An advantage of the use of questionnaires, however is that with these "responses can be quantified using various sophisticated statistical techniques and the results presented with all the confidence number crunching brings". You can also have "an efficient use of time, anonymity, the possibility of a high return rate and standardized questions" (Munn & Drever, 1990). We have, then, the possibility to know for sure how many students mentioned a certain topic or activity and what each individual student suggests.

Questionnaires can also be combined with informal talks as in Correa's investigation. In it students were asked, among other things, what topics they expected to find in the course and what topics they had studied in previous courses. Once students had completed the questionnaire students

were asked to read their answers out loud, to be able to establish differences and similarities among students' answers and to discuss them in group. After this, questionnaires were collected and analyzed in a more quantitative way to find out the number of students that had mentioned each of the topics.

4. Students' Journals: Journals or diaries, as described by Cárdenas (1997:69), are "notebooks" in which students "enter preferably on a daily basis, what they have learned, what has been difficult for them, what they have enjoyed most and even their impressions or perceptions on their teacher's work". They should be written on the students' free will and should be handed in periodically so that problems can be solved as they appear. Since at the beginning it is difficult for students to decide what to say in their journals, they should be given some guidelines as to which aspects to consider. Those guidelines may take the form of hints, such as the ones below (Cárdenas,1997).

1. Topics studied in class
2. Your degree of familiarity with them

3. How well you understood them
4. How well you can use and/or apply them
5. Difficulties you found and why you had them
6. Aspects that were easy for you and why

They can also take the form of questions that students can answer if they feel they do not have any comments to make. In Correa's investigation, since students were having problems finding ideas to write in their journals, which was reflected in the nature of the comments they were making, they were given the following questions as guidelines

1. Which activities were most useful to me?
2. Which were not so useful ?
3. Did I participate in the lesson?
4. Did I work well with my group?
5. What did I learn?
6. What problems did I have?

Students could choose whether to answer these questions or to make their own comments. As a result, students who had not had any problems writing their comments continued writing them, and students who had had

problems with finding ideas began using them.

The comments students make in their journals should be answered. Teachers should take some time to write down brief notes after the students' comments. This will show students their comments are really being read. In the investigation mentioned above, students received comments which ranged from wishing them a good vacation and thanking them for their comments to apologizing for a specific behavior in class such as going too fast or mixing capital and small letters when writing

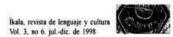"I'm sorry I went so fast that class, I'll try to go slowlier next class".

"You are right I shouldn't do that, not when my writing is serving as a model and not when I'm a grammar teacher. I'll try to correct that. Thanks for telling me and I'm glad you feel well in my classes".
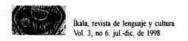
If students mention having a problem in the classroom, something should be done to solve it. This will encourage students to continue talking about the problems they find in the classroom. One of the first problems students mentioned in Correa's investigation was that only three stu-

Tischgesellschaft (1988)
Katharina Fritsch

dents were participating in class. The problem was solved by the teacher by (a) pointing at students who did not participate very much before asking questions, (b) avoiding eye contact with the students who wanted to answer all the questions, and (c) talking to the students who spoke most. This reaffirmed the students in the idea that it was worthwhile to mention the problems they found with the course and made the students feel they were the authors of the solution. But is it the teacher's job to solve all the pro-

blems that arise? When presented with a problem in our classrooms, we teachers have always asked ourselves the question: What can I do to solve this problem? If our students are prepared to tell us which problems they find in the course, they can also tell us how we could solve them. When given the opportunity, students have proved to be able to make suggestions not only as to how to conduct the class, but also as to how to solve the problems that arise. In the previous investigation, students made very good recommendations as to how to solve some of the problems they had identified

Therefore, the questions should not be "What should I do to solve this problem?", but "What should we, students and teacher, do together to solve this problem?"

" I enjoyed the class but I suggest that you make the shy to be more part of the class and the talkative and advanced students not to be the centre of it."

Therefore, the questions should not be "What should I do to solve this problem?", but "What should we, students and teacher, do together to solve this problem?"

HOW TO EVALUATE THE RESULTS?

Although the success of each action taken to solve a problem should be evaluated right after it has been taken, it is also good to have an evaluation of the appropriateness of the decisions made in the beginning of the course regarding the course program and the procedures followed throughout the course. To do this, students and teacher can have the last informal talk or students can answer a questionnaire in which they can express their opinion about the content of the course and the methodology used. This will give students and teachers the opportunity to reflect back on what was done and learned and draw conclusions that may be helpful to both of them in the following courses they have.

CONCLUSIONS

Although teachers may have a very good idea of what our students needs and wants are, what topics should be included in the programs, what me-

thodology and form of assessment to use and what to do with the problems we encounter in our courses, without listening to what our students have to say, this idea is incomplete.

We, teachers, should give students a protagonist role in our courses, we should let them participate in the decisions that have to do with the subject, we should prompt them to talk about the problems they find and involve them in their solution. By doing this, we will not only progress as teachers at a speed we would have never dreamed of, but also give way to our students' progress.

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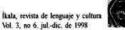
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Three Coca cola Bottles (1968)
Clive Baker