

FEEL GOOD ATMOSPHERE VS. NEW METHODOLOGY



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This article is a document of action research (N=20) conducted in an English language institute during the 2001/2002 academic year. It is a genuine and personal knowledge in the sense that the process of solving the problem and the solution itself cannot be projected and applied directly onto other situations but it can serve as a source of experience and practice. The aim of the research was to investigate the interaction between students in pair and group work. The outcome of the research was the induced shift in the system of values that resulted in increased tolerance, better understanding and communication among students and the teacher.

Key words: interaction, classroom dynamics, 'feel good' atmosphere.

AIM

I embarked on this research with the purpose of focusing attention on interaction between students (N=20), as I wanted to see how much time they spent on/off a task, and I also wanted to investigate if they all participated in completion of tasks when teamed in pair/group work. But very soon I channelled the aim of the investigation to classroom dynamic that is how the individuals within the group worked together.

SAMPLE

Participants were 20 students attending my English classes at an English language institute in Rijeka. The students were between 17 and 18 years of age.

1. PROBLEM AND METHODOLOGY

Whenever I asked my students to change pairs, it seemed it took them a long time to reorganise and start work. One day at the beginning of the school year, Student A stood up and asked why she had to change her pair when she felt more comfortable working with her best friend, (Student B). She justified her stand saying they knew each other well, found it easy



to express feelings and opinion, and were the first to complete the activities. She explicitly expressed her reluctance to working with anybody but Student B. The overt disclosure made everyone, including myself, feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. I was confused. The group had been together for years, had known each other well, had never objected to doing any activity, and I had never noticed any problem. My first explanation was that both Students A and B were shy, insecure, probably lacked self-confidence and felt best when working together. But was I missing the significance of what she said? Did I inadvertently overlook the real cause? My initial reaction to Student A's remarks was that she was shy and insecure, but *the interview* opened the possibility to the fact that she could be courageous, speaking boldly and forthrightly what bothered her. As a consequence I was ashamed of myself for having too quickly labelled the student shy and insecure. My second step was to plan how to collect more data on the problem.

The following session I asked the students to write an essay on their attitudes to working in pairs and groups. The essay '*performed the function of a questionnaire with one open question*' (Altrichter, Posch and Somekh, 1993:114). All students stressed the importance and advantages of working in pairs/groups but only if they worked with 'the right person', with somebody they knew, did not 'hate' and who belonged to 'the same group'.

My next step was to think of different seating arrangements, and to plan speaking activities, which were to be handled easily in the new seating arrangement. I also asked '*a critical friend*' to observe my classes. In a pre-class consultation, I informed the colleague of my concern regarding the emergence of divisions within the class, most notably between two groups of students, although within each group smaller cliques were also present. This had become apparent through my own *observation* of the students' tendencies towards pair and group work that is, clear preferences were expressed by individual students with regard to whom they would work with.

During the observation of the third lesson, it became more apparent that the interpersonal relationship between Student A and other members of the class was such that it was proving obstructive to the smooth management of activities. This was read as a cry for attention and a self-image problem. Student C seemed to enjoy 'stoking the fire' and Student A perceived his behaviour as injurious to her self-esteem. Further step was that the next lesson should seek to couple Students A and C in pair work and observe their participation in the activities. The two students should be made to work together in a role-play situation in which they would be required to adopt personas, that is to play roles other than themselves. The object here would be to gauge the respective behaviour and performance of this pair and it was hoped that interpersonal tensions would be reduced. As for Student A's self-image problems, it was questionable whether I could resolve it. However, the observer and I agreed that the situation was clearly affecting group dynamics and, as such, some mitigation was more than likely desired.

2. GENERATING HYPOTHESIS



The collected data were juxtaposed and the three categories developed.

1. Student A teamed with Student B - compatibility of characters concurs, there was no evidence of any problem.
2. Student A teamed with Student C - strong reluctance to working together triggered disruptive classroom dynamics.
3. Student A teamed with the rest of the classroom - sulking, moping, albeit complying, and in her stride when taking the role of a mediator or a leader.

The *hypothesis* I established was out of my beliefs that teaching has different facets, many transcending education but exerting impact on students' upbringing and forming personalities:

If I encouraged more positive attitudes to working in pairs and groups on equal, tolerant, collaborative terms, I might mitigate Student A's inherent animosity, incompatibility and discomfort and I might induce a shift in her system of values so that she started to enjoy working and learning with students of diverse attitudes and opinions. This would have a positive effect on classroom dynamics.

3. PLANNING ACTION STEPS

I planned the following action steps not to remedy Student A's self-esteem, because it was a long-term process, but, hopefully, to trigger a shift in her system of values and attitudes to pair and group work.

- Students watched the film EMMA - Two lessons.
- Students wrote letters to characters from the film - to develop better understanding of literary characters' behaviour, (an activity from Seth Lindstromberg, 'Letters to literary characters', 1997:157). One lesson.
- Students worked on a play - to foster group cohesion. (SPRING FEVER. Maley and Duff, 1982:220.) Two lessons.
- Students worked on a mini-saga (Maley, 1994:87) as basis for expansion, media transfer, and reformulation. One lesson.
- Students worked on a poem 'Welsh Incident' by Robert Graves, (Lindstromberg, 1997: 188-190) to foster interaction in a group.
- Students wrote a *composition - reflection* on reactions, attitudes, and new values to pair

and group work. One lesson. Introspection would hopefully prove the action steps valid.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS



The research started with classroom interaction and students' behaviour. The first part of the research soon focused on classroom dynamics, with the result that Student A's attitudes to pair and group work and her self-esteem clearly affected classroom dynamics.

I was worried when I decided to scrutinise the relationship between Students A and C. I needed proof that there was a strong personality clash between these two students. It had a strong negative influence on the classroom dynamics. The only way to confirm or deny the assumption was to allocate them the same task. As a result, my decision was to take a risk. If I had not taken the step, the whole research would have been at stake. My intention was not to give priority to research over ethics, even though I was fully aware of the danger, but at that point I could not see any other way to solve the problem. The lesson was a crucial moment and it proved that the relationship between Student A and other students, Student C in particular, was obstructive to classroom management. But I also wanted to see if we could all take the productive benefit from the situation. The intention was: *if I make it better for Student A, I will make it better for all*. Barker (1984:192) says 'It is now believed that some degree of intragroup conflict is useful and productive. It is possible that when conflict is appropriately channelled, it can contribute to more effective results.'

Having established the hypothesis, I wanted to create activities and an atmosphere that would help Student A and the rest of the students '*feel good*' (Barksdale, 1989:2) about themselves, *feel good* about their peers, *feel good* in the classroom, *feel good* emotionally and physically. And if I wanted to initiate a shift in Student A's system of values so that she started to enjoy working with other students, I felt I had to help improve her self-esteem and allay feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. While I was observing her in the classroom, I noticed some symptoms of low self-esteem. She had a constant, very strong need for my attention. During my lessons she often came to me to ask for information, advice, clarification, sometimes just to exchange a word or two. The need to show superiority over other students and dominate my attention and time was very often disapproved of the class. Barksdale (1989: 11) gives some psychological characteristics of people who lack self-esteem 'People who are anxious, vacillating and unsure about themselves, absorbed in their own problems and sense of inadequacy...who have a desperate need to win, to be liked and accepted by everyone: who must be right every time; who have a compulsive need to fulfil others' expectations of them; have an aching hunger for recognition, approval and admiration—to love and be loved.' Further characteristics of Student A's lack of self-esteem were:

- Sense of inadequacy, confirmed in her reflective composition.
- Present need for recognition, approval, love, and perception of how others see her confirmed in her written reflective piece.

I became involved and was eager to help Student A enhance her awareness, challenge herself as to who *she really was* by exploring her thoughts and her moods, her attitudes, actions and reactions.

The action step I implemented was that of writing letters to literary characters. Student A wrote an emotional and very critical letter to Miss Bates, an 'outsider' as she saw her. She condemned her for having humiliated herself by trying to fit into a group she did not belong to. But in her reflective piece, Student A described the feelings she had had when she joined the group. She saw herself as an outsider, rejected and ignored by the class that had already attained cohesion. I remember I noticed the release of tension and a relief in Student A at the end of the activity. The outburst of emotions might have initiated or contributed to the awareness process of 'Who and what I am?'. By attacking and, at the same time, making an attempt to understand one's behaviour, she made her first step towards achieving sound self-esteem.

The change of values and attitudes to collaboration and taking responsibility in pair and group work was also present in Student B. In the written reflective piece, Student B revealed her new attitudes and awareness to group work. She had experienced the advantages of working with different students, found joy in sharing ideas and getting to know each other. She was aware of the change and new motivation it had brought her and could no longer tolerate resistance or lack of cooperation on the part of her peers. She wanted everybody to share her new insight.

I think that the students' *reflective compositions* proved the validity of action steps and research undertaken. Student A showed a shift in the system of values. All students stressed the positive change in the atmosphere, in interrelationship, in communication on and of task. Their compositions demonstrated they 'felt good'. None of them though was aware of what had caused the change. The change came spontaneously and slowly. We could hardly expect a teenager student to be aware of the causes and time of change. Even adults would hardly be aware of the instance themselves. I also believe it was the students' self-concept, the picture they had of themselves that changed. And as Barker (1984:109) claims:

Self-concept has a very strong effect on both interpersonal and intrapersonal communication. ... Self-concept is not inborn; rather it is developed through interaction with people and the environment. Specifically, it develops as a function of three primary sets of variables: our past experiences, reference groups with which we identify, and the roles which we play in our lives.

The change might have been triggered when all of us, including myself, started to act differently, eager to adjust and do our best to contribute to learning and socialising. We all contributed to group cohesion. I started changing when I crossed the threshold; I began *empathising* with them and in this new mood, this new awareness, a new relationship was born. I was triggered to give more attention and time. Student A's words, her reflective composition, '*But you cared*' are, for me, the best evaluation of the research.



CONCLUSION



The research initiated changes in my students but, equally important, it contributed to my personal and professional growth and development. It goes along with Carl Rodgers: 'the teacher must be a real person to the learner, rather than being concerned merely to act out a role; second, he must trust and accept his pupils, respecting their feelings and opinions; third, he must also possess the ability to empathize with his pupils.' found in Saunders (1979:52). The change started painfully with awareness that what I *thought* I was doing in my classroom *was not* what I was doing. I had always tried to understand my students in terms of how they felt and behaved, but the first stage of the research indicated a possibility that I was superficial. I erred by quickly labelling Student A shy and insecure. Having contemplated it, I realised the mistake, and I tried to think of avenues to improve. Helping her, I was helping all students and myself. By observing Student A's behaviour, by empathising with her I questioned my attitudes and actions. More significantly, I was more concerned with my students' feelings and behaviour than with strictly following the syllabus. Finally, I was ready to experiment, take risk and incorporate available knowledge from other fields, like psychology for example. Knowledge from sources for support in counselling also helped me gain attitudes to promote change in all of us. I was aware that they may have been other possibilities and alternatives of approach but in the context and time those were the most appropriate.

To sum up, I strongly believe that all we teachers need to do is to look closely at who our students are, what they need and what is best for them. We need to provide a '*feel good*' atmosphere where students' self-esteem and self-concept will be enhanced. New methodology comes second.

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'FEEL GOOD' ATMOSFERA NASUPROT INOVACIJAMA U METODICI.

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Ključne riječi: interakcija, dinamika rada unutar grupe i para, 'feel good' atmosfera.

