So...Did They Teach You That In “Teacher College?”

By: Cindy Kline

It struck me strangely the first time I heard the phrase “teacher college”, because none of us that went through it ever referred to it that way...But from the lips of a seventh grader, the conceptualization was understood...Señora (I taught Spanish)...how did you DO that?

It should be understood that I wasn’t mid-demonstration, or explanation, he delivered his query after one of those rare, but meaningful “ah ha” moments....when something “clicked” between last class and today’s class...when he realized that there was actually something I did OUTSIDE of the classroom in order to do help him learn INSIDE the classroom. I found through the years, the question took different forms at different times, but it arose repeatedly, sincerely, sometimes with great awe... my students wanted to know how I got them to learn!

So as one of the 1000 decisions I would make that day...I thought quickly...what pithy response can I marshal to motivate, inspire and electrify his young mind today?

Having spent nearly 20 years in business, I wasn't the traditional Niagara University graduate education student...I had a mortgage, family, nearly twice the years of others in my cohort, and history. My experiences were many; personal, professional and academic, combining uniquely to create my teaching philosophy. With my inner dialogue ignited, I formulated potential responses. Well, Roberto...here is what I know....

YOU COME FIRST. I learned that if I concentrate on what YOU are doing in the class, on what YOU create, on how YOU behave, etc., rather than focusing on what I do, that I will be attuned to your developing needs and I can address them as they surface. Sometimes this means that I change my plan for class based on how you and your classmates are reacting, or modify an assignment on the fly, but always based on your needs, not mine. (Student-centered learning)

YOU ALSO COME LAST. I know that your mastery of the content is my endgame. Until you have achieved all that you are possible of achieving, I am not done. I have to give you repeated opportunities to practice with the material, each time assessing how close you are to the goal. As I give you specific feedback, you will learn from the errors. In this way, when I test you at the end....you will not be surprised that you have done well. (Formative and Summative assessment and Feedback)

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT. I also accept that as you learn, you will make errors working with the information. As I assess you formatively, I will not hold these errors against you. I will credit you for the action of working hard to learn deeply, NOT for the accuracy of your developing attempts. I know that you must “struggle” to make sense of new material, and by carefully intervening as you need it, I empower you to learn. (Grading Wisely)

PRETTY IS HIGHLY OVERRATED. I need to let the learning get “messy”. Like playing a new video game, you have to experiment with various tactics, avenues, tools, strategies in order to help you succeed. But each time you fail, you learn what NOT to do, and you continue trying. I create experiences for you that
are varied to allow everyone to find the ways that work best for their learning. The more varied ways we play with the content, the more likely everyone is to do well. (Multiple Intelligences)

COMMUNITY COUNTS. I want you to feel safe and open to learning at all times in my class. Therefore, I will respect you, and I expect the same from you and all of your classmates. You frequently collaborate with others to complete assignments, because in real life we must all do so. Cooperative learning allows you to master both content and to practice universal social skills. We are all better with others, than any one of us alone. (Cooperative Learning)

FAIR IS NOT ALWAYS “EQUAL”. Although I start with the same expectations for all of you, I recognize the way you each get there may be a different route. Like driving to the mall...if I don't have car, I may take the bus, or ask someone to drive me. If the traffic is heavy, I may try another time, if the road is blocked, I will have to switch streets. So when my students have different needs, I accommodate them. My expectations don't change, but how each and every student gets there is a concern for me. (Differentiation)

I CANNOT THINK FOR YOU. I already know the material. I learned it long ago, and my telling you is not teaching you. I must give you chances to engage with it, using your own thinking to find a home for it in the personal file drawers of your brain. You must open the drawers, find the correct file, sift through what’s already there, and find a place where it connects, to file it away for future reference. Of course, you will never be the same again. The ways that you make sense of new knowledge personally is what creates deep learning. (Negotiating Meaning)

YOU ARE NOT A SPONGE. As I create learning experiences for you, I keep in mind that the more actively you are engaged with the new content, the more ways you connect it to other knowledge, the more modalities I force you to employ, and the more often you revisit it, the deeper you will learn. I know that talking at you over a PowerPoint will not achieve the same results as you creating something using that content. You know we sometimes reword concepts, we organize vocabulary, we create questions of our own, we make graphics to help our understanding, we test hypotheses, etc...all of which require us to apply and synthesize what we are learning. (Active Learning)

RELEVANCE IS MEANINGFUL. I never bother you with busywork. Everything I plan is designed to help you develop into a productive citizen of the world (with all that entails) and to contribute positively to our 21st Century global economy. I want to know that I am providing you opportunities to practice skills that will transfer to other subjects, situations, and over time. Skills and knowledge you will use if not immediately, later in life. I connect you to outside the school when we do service learning, when we welcome expert guests to share with us, and when I require you to present your new learning to various audiences beyond our class.

LIFE DOESN’T COME WITH AN INSTRUCTION MANUAL. When I am vague with you, I am doing so strategically. I did not forget something or leave it out by accident, I expect you to try to fill in the gaps. And, I usually allow you to discuss this with someone else, so you don’t “implode” under the weight of the unknown. But as you think about the possibilities, you are exploring, creating, assessing, thinking critically, you are developing the ability to weigh options, to consider what might be. I don’t spoon feed you because it’s limiting. I make myself available for help, so use me as any resource. (Critical thinking, help-seeking)

So in the end ....how did I answer Roberto?

Very simply....Experience Roberto...Experience.