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A Reflection: ACUE Made Teaching Effective and Enjoyable

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Abstract

After attending the Effective Teaching Practices course through the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE), teaching a class, large or small, has become more satisfying and enjoyable. Due to my ACUE experience, my teaching style continues to evolve. I've become more attuned to student dynamics. As instructors, we have the power to facilitate our classes in many effective ways, and ACUE offers teaching strategies that are based on research. I proactively have been implementing many of the techniques I have learned in ACUE, and I have noticed a significant increase in my students' engagement in class discussions and activities. This reflection of the ACUE course is based on its five main domains, i.e., designing an effective course and class, establishing a productive classroom environment, using active learning techniques, promoting higher order thinking, and assessing to inform instruction and promote learning.

Keywords: Q2S, TRC, ACUE, active learning, class interactions, teaching techniques, students' experiences

1. Designing an effective course and class

Immediately upon starting the ACUE course, one of the first things I was inspired to change was how I designed my courses. Specifically, ACUE taught me how to prepare a comprehensive presentation of my syllabi. I accomplished this by adding visual aids such as tables and charts to better communicate my grading policies, learning outcomes, and assessments. This helped me successfully achieve a mutual understanding between my students and I regarding course expectations at the start of the quarter.

After being exposed to ACUE videos of students' perceptions to lecture-long classes, I realized that my lectures were likely perceived as monotone and not engaging. I also learned how to design a more effective class, specifically, how to incorporate engaging class activities. Being

a relatively new instructor, I had the tendency to fill the entire class time with a lecture, devoid of interactive activities. I learned to not fill the class with a traditional lecture. I also learned that I should steer away from attempting to cover an entire chapter in one single class. This notion completely changed my approach because, previously, I attempted to address every single subtopic within an assigned chapter, resulting in a very long and time-consuming lecture.

2. Establishing a productive classroom environment

At the start of every quarter, one of my favorite things I like to do with my students is establish rapport to help set the tone in my classes. While I am aware of the importance in building rapport with my students, ACUE made me realize the power of sharing my own personal journey as a student. I found this to be especially true at California State University San Bernardino (CSUSB) because the student population here is one of the most diverse in southern California. I myself immigrated to the US from Nepal after completing my undergraduate studies in Sri Lanka. I lived more than half my life as a Theravadin Buddhist Monk and I am only 34 years old. And English is my fifth language. When I share my background with my students, I see how my students are intrigued and a little more interested in not only listening to my perspective in the subject that I am teaching, but I also see that they are more interested in participating in class because they see me more than just a professor with authority. They see my human side. And we connect on the shared understanding that the journey of completing one's bachelor's degree is a struggle worth experiencing.

After learning how to establish better rapport with my students as a means to establish a more productive classroom environment, I have also learned to identify and manage two very important types of students, i.e., the overperforming student and the underperforming student. ACUE taught me to look out for certain qualities that identify these two types of students and to

understand how each type can have a big impact on the class dynamics, particularly how it shapes the participation of the whole class. Based on their type, I have learned how to incentivize these students to improve their individual performance and encourage more engaging class discussions.

3. Using active learning techniques

My class sizes vary from 20-90 students in each quarter. My approach that worked well in small groups did not yield the same outcome as in large groups. You can imagine the discouragement and frustration at the end of each class meeting when you notice, despite your best attempts, that students seemed bewildered or disengaged in the class activities that you have prepared for them. I experienced these issues, and at times I doubted my abilities to teach and it affected my desire to continue my career as a professor. Prior to the ACUE course, I had read about teaching techniques in textbooks and watched some videos. None of them were clear enough to convince me to apply a new approach. The ACUE course offers professors a variety of media to not only convince us, but also vividly demonstrate “active learning techniques.” Principles of the active learning techniques were implemented in ACUE course so that we could learn how to administer these techniques in our classes including: research-based approaches, videos, reflective assignment, and group discussion. One effective technique that I experimented with was the divide-and-conquer technique. I broke down my lectures into smaller portions and after every 15-20 minutes of lecture, I incorporate a brief class activity such as “Think-Pair-Share” which I learned from ACUE course. Another strategy I tested out in my class was to deliver many mini-in-class assignments. I noticed that by doing this, students were more motivated to read their textbook, and I was able to test their knowledge in real time. Overall, these strategies helped me develop a clear plan at the beginning of each class meeting.

4. Promoting higher order thinking

This domain of the ACUE course was highly applicable to my class “Introduction to Experimental Psychology.” This course has a reputation of being one of the most challenging courses in the psychology department. Students come to this class with many preconceived ideas, stereotypes, and prejudices that affect the instructor-student relationship from the beginning of the quarter. One of the course objectives of this class is for each student to develop two manuscripts. It is understandably a daunting task for an undergraduate student. Most students will need a great deal of assistance throughout the course. How the ACUE course helped me improve my role as a professor in this specific class is by highlighting the importance of providing unambiguous direction and explanations for the development of the manuscripts. I accomplished this by refining my outline for each section of the manuscript. I developed several clever in-class examples that resonate with the actual experiments that students will be expected to refer to. I also learned to provide immediate feedback to students’ drafts. By implementing the principles learned in ACUE, teaching this class has become easier and my Student Evaluation of Teacher Effectiveness (SOTE) rating has increased to 6 out of 6. I believe that receiving the highest SOTE rating in one of the most demanding classes is testament of students’ positive experiences and reflects my effort in fostering student success.

5. Assessing to inform instruction and promote learning

Most of our students are confident to question issues such as grade discrepancy. As instructors, we have to take responsibility in being fair, consistent, and transparent with our grading policy. After taking the ACUE course, I learned how to provide clearer directions for each assignment. Specifically, I started providing a grading rubric for assignments in my classes, including Experimental Psychology class, further illustrating to students my rationale for how

each point is earned. In my Behavioral Modification and Critical Thinking classes, I started providing examples of case analyses and critical thinking projects to provide students with a model of the type of work that is expected.

As a result of these changes, I found that there was a significant increase in timely submissions of complete assignments. Consequently, I reduced my turn-around time in returning students' work thereby providing immediate feedback to students so they can learn from their mistakes before the submission of their next assignment or exam. In addition, ACUE taught me to provide students with the opportunity to provide me, the instructor, with constructive criticism regarding their experience of the course. I achieve this through a mid-quarter student feedback survey that I have personally developed using Qualtrics platform. This survey allows them to evaluate the course lecture, assignments, and exams that they have received thus far. The feedback I receive from these surveys help to shape the second half of the quarter. I do this by keeping my assessments relatively flexible and open to adjustments after receiving the mid-quarter student feedback.

In sum, it is now almost impossible to plan a class without incorporating ideas that I have learned in the ACUE course. Honestly, teaching has become more enjoyable. A two-hour (approximately one hour and 50 minutes) class now seems less tedious because I am equipped with many tools and techniques that I can implement to increase students' learning outcomes. Students performance has dramatically increased, and I have noticed a significant drop in DFWI (letter grade "D", Fail, withdrawal, and incomplete) rates in all my classes. Lastly, a common and rewarding comment that I receive from my students is "*Time flies in this class.*"