

The Writings of Guy Bensusan

Many of us have followed the writings of Dr. Guy Bensusan for a long time. Others are just discovering him. He is a frequent contributor to the DEOS listserv, and freely shares his rich experience and philosophy. Over the years, Ed Journal has published a number of his articles. He has given his kind permission to publish these each month starting with his writings of about five years ago.

His philosophy and practice have continued to grow with the advent of new technology and the acceptance of distance learning as a viable and effective alternative to traditional methods of teaching. He is the master teacher, leading us into new paradigms of teaching and learning. Through these writings he will take us on a journey of exploration and discussion. He will show us how to motivate students and achieve results with anywhere-anytime collaborative learning that are the envy of most classroom teachers.

The *Bensusan Method* is enriching the lives of tens of thousands of students. Ed Journal is grateful to have Dr. Bensusan present this series of articles each month so that you, your colleagues, and your students can enjoy and benefit from his experience.

Chapter B-1

Design learning experiences for students during class

By Guy Bensusan

When students who have read or otherwise accessed the same information, have thought about its implications, and are all gathered together in a classroom, what might be the most productive course of action for a teacher? Does a human resource and learning potential exist here which a creative teacher can use to engage those pre-prepared students in ways which will help them learn, or is it better simply to dump more data upon them?

To me these situations provide a great opportunity for a learning-centered teacher to use the together-in-class time to explore the subject ideas, contexts, meanings, sources of information, schools of interpretations, and a host of multilevel elements for students to talk about and otherwise manipulate. Therein lies a major key to unlocking many of the current problems and challenges in education.

The engagement of active minds already filled with information will help to transform (1) the heads-down-and-writing-notes syndrome, (2) the dehumanizing banality of being passive recipients, (3) the inactivity of minds during the copying process, (4) the lock-step vassalage of students as compliants and subservients, (5) the waste of human energies and resources, and (6) the loss of heart and desire for the excitement of learning.

It is so very easy to turn this around. Instead of a classroom full of "heads down and writing," it should be "heads up, eyeballs flashing, and dialogue, debate and discussion." Instead of a classroom of passivity and quiescence, it should be filled with active and energized engagement. Instead of students constantly doodling, looking at their watches or the clock, longing for the dreary monotone to cease, it should be the rapid passage of time spent in enjoyable and productive, mind-expanding interactions over ideas and meanings and possibilities.

NOT ONE MINUTE OF COSTLY CLASS TIME SHOULD BE SQUANDERED WITH DATA TRANSFER OR TESTS!

Those things can be accomplished in a much more productive manner elsewhere.

This is not a utopian or even a difficult goal to achieve. In fact, it is an extraordinarily simple process if the proper foundations are laid, if the conditions for interaction are safe, comfortable and dependable, and if the stimulation and follow-through are conducive, interesting, intriguing and ACCOMPLISHABLE. The most serious, complex and difficult topic can become captivating, absorbing, and can entice or draw in the most jaded and reluctant of students, but the teacher has to be creative, must be perceived as trustworthy and the goal

has to be reachable by the students. A reward for the learners' effort must be available at the end, not just as a positive word, but as a genuine sense of personal accomplishment.

Since learning is achieved by the learner proceeding from the known to the unknown. A most successful tactic is to present something which has already been dealt with in a previous session and recapitulate some of the important points which have been covered before. For instance, a tactic which I use in my arts and culture courses (whether Southwest, Mexican, Caribbean, Central American or South American), is to take a cultural example, be it music, dress or cuisine, and recapitulate some of the territory we have previously covered. The appropriate conceptual models have naturally been placed up in front of the classroom where all students can see them, and not only are they omnipresent and therefore subliminal, but they will constantly be referred to as we dialogue.

I may start out with basic recapitulation. "Okay, let's go back over what we said last time about how a cuisine will evolve over the ages. We have our cultural sequences to think about, so what comes to mind here?" Then a student will respond, "Well, since this is a Western Hemisphere topic, we have to remember that the Indians were first and then the Spaniards came." I will reply, "Good place to start, and what does that imply for the eating?" Another student will say, "Corn and beans, chiles and squashes will be in the diet already, before Columbus comes." Another student will add, "And tomatoes too, plus potatoes in the Andes."

"Aha!," I will say, "What has just been added to our start in Cultural Sequences?"

A student will answer, "We are going beyond the original assumption as to location, and added-in other geographic areas, which means we are into the other part of the model, Regional Diversities." And so on --- we will cover the six-part cultural Hexadigm model for a while, trying to get the student to think about the interrelation of all of the parts, and also to form their own sub-categorization, which will take us farther into taxonomic or classificational thinking.

An example might be, "Does it seem that all the foods we have mentioned are in the same category?" "Yes, these are all veggies, and we have not mentioned any other kind, like meats and drinks." "That's a good point, where can we go with that? How many subdivisions should we set up for that?" There will be a pause, and, if it is too long, I can ask, "Well, how would a professor of a nutrition class set up the categories?" or some other similar question. At this point the teacher has options in a two-dimensional tradition: do we now go broad and shallow, or narrow and deep?

If I choose, or let the students choose the directions, we can make significant headway. I might ask, "How about it, have we reviewed enough? Or shall we lateralize and do a parallel exercise with another art form?" Their response tells me what to do next, but I need to be ready to follow their lead. Thus, if the answer is, "Let's do some more here," then I will respond with something like, "Okay, do you want to finish categorizing foods for the Cultural Sequences or move on to the Mutual Influences that begin with the arrival of the Spaniards?"

Either answer is satisfactory. The key is always to turn it back upon the students with questions that pose reasonable alternatives, which illustrate connections, and which are sufficiently broad in their approach so that every student in the course is pulled along in responding to those questions. Here is another important point. I do not stand with my grade book opened and pencil poised, recording points for the person who responds. In fact, it has become clear to me there are two kinds of verbal participation in this learning process. Some students say it aloud and help to create the ping-pong of the ongoing dialogue-multilogue, while others say it quietly, inside their heads. Both groups are learning!!

As to whether the broad-shallow approach is more andragogically useful than the narrow-deep, one can make a good argument either way, but it is an easy trap to fall back into the "Teacher Leads" tradition. The teacher can provide information on many components that contextualize the larger picture, or can present them with layers of profound intricacies of a single facet of that picture. The survey goes one way; the case study goes the other. Both have their strengths as well as weaknesses, and we can also combine both tactics, with the teacher covering the field while also spending significant time on one feature in depth. In doing so, however, the teacher has taken over. The point is always to make the students do the work, and keep on asking questions that will continually relate what is being said to the larger context. This practice gives students the tools for lateral constructivism.

If we remain in the Learning Paradigm, we can say, "Okay, we will go deeper here into just one part of it. Let us pick the meats and fish component and see what we can conjure up. What meats and fish, to use our own nutritional categories, will Mexican Indians have access to before the Conquest?" Someone will bring up deer and other wild game in the mountains, others will mention fish in the big lakes and rivers, and someone else will be thinking that we have to slide over into the Regional Diversities category, because farther south we are in the tropics and farther north in the drier and more temperate zone, plus the fact of high mountain lakes versus coastal lagoons, fresh water versus sea water, and so on.

When I first began to use this technique, I was extremely thorough. I always made certain that I went into every aspect of the model with specific examples. As time went on I found that it was more student-centered if I let them do it. Sometime it would occur in the following class meeting; a student would say, "I have been thinking about what we did last time, and I have a bunch more ideas to add to that." So we do it. I encourage it to continue rather than cut it off. Where the students are is where the teacher needs to be.

But the teacher does not remain as a passive questioner. S/he should always be thinking about the weeks ahead, which will include going deeper into the same subject and lateralizing into related fields, as well as going into the sources of information which students will be using and how to evaluate them. There are also the various author contexts they will be running into, and beyond

that school of interpretation which encompass the field. The teacher may not be the storyteller in this case, having shifted that role onto the students, but the components and techniques of storytelling, foreshadowing, insinuating, pre-preparing, and so on, all have to be a part of the overall conducting by the teacher as learning-activity moderator.

Once again, to use the metaphor of collaborative storytelling in the classroom, regardless of our topic, the teacher does well to build on what the students are bringing up, gently insinuating the conversation along useful paths. Success in doing this relates directly to the teacher's behavior. Tradition and classroom layout already make it clear that the teacher is the power figure. One should do NOTHING to intensify that --- no use of authoritative tone, no telling the student that the answer is wrong, no pontificating or asking specific questions to certain students one after another, as if recording the answers for points --- nothing of that nature.

Every aspect of this type of exploration must be natural, flow freely, be directed at the learning, not at collecting points for assigning grades. Open-ended questions seem to work best, even with a delayed response. No need to push; silence is sometimes useful. Students need to think, formulate their answers, and also get over basic stage fright. If a response does not come, it also works to lighten up and rephrase.

I will often say, "Huh, didn't you see the question mark at the end of my question?" Or, "Well, I probably phrased that poorly, let me see if I can say it in a different way." And, if you are really looking into the eyeballs of the student you can probably tell whether someone is about to say something, and then, by simply staring back into their eyes, a response will come.

Another way to lighten things up is with a hand puppet! It is amazing how a puppet or even a simple glove can serve as a prop for propelling learning activities into being. One tactic is to put on a hand puppet and ask a question of it, then let it answer as you change your voice in simulation. It brings a bit of coming relief to the hard work of thinking, shaking the student into another mode. Then you can say, "Hey, puppet, you heard me ask that question, right?" Puppet answers, if only by nodding its head. "So, Mr. Puppet, what do you think Mary or Bill's answer would be to that?" The puppet answers, and you turn to Mary or Bill and ask, "Is that right?" One of them will usually answer, and if they don't, throw them the puppet and tell them to ask the puppet and get a response.

Yes, it is dumb and silly and almost anti-intellectual if one is stuffy with the vision of teacher as god/goddess, but it works. The point is that both faculty and students are on a hump of self-consciousness, and the hump must be traversed, and only when you get over the hump can you get on with learning! They say great omelettes come from broken eggs! One must venture, try, make mistakes and sometime even evoke great laughter before the ice is broken, so that we can move ahead with the real work.

In my electronic classroom I do not even have to put on the hand-puppet. I can

set it up on the console, and the camera operator will focus one camera on it, with another on me. Then, when I need the puppet, I can simply verbalize, "Well, I guess we need to ask our friendly visitor that question," and the shot of the puppet will pop up on the screen, opening up all sorts of possibilities. The puppet can now respond to the question through the professor, or I can ask a student what he thinks the puppet would answer --- a visual that in no way embarrasses by showing the student's face on the monitor. Rather we get the juxtaposition of the puppet picture and the student voice. It does not take too much of that sort of thing to break the barriers of talking on-screen for most people.

Because you have set things up from the start, the students have learned about the models, are acquainted with the roadmaps of the highways they will be following, and therefore are always in the mode of practicing to get better, rather than being surprised with new ideas from the authoritarian teacher. This is important, because the "teacher as co-learner model" is vital to the success of the enterprise. All the students are fully aware that you are the teacher and boss and the leader of the expedition. But, as with any voyage of discovery, you never know what will appear on the horizon, or what interesting perspective will be raised by one of the students.

In my case, I am very fortunate in the wide diversity of cultures and nationalities represented by the students in the classroom. American Indians from many of the twenty-two tribes and nations in Arizona provide some very helpful perspectives to the so-called Anglo students. Anglo is an interesting term out here, because it actually means everyone who is not Indian or Mexican (more recently Latino). Thus, African American and Asian American students and even nationals from abroad will refer to themselves, along with our local cowboys, railroaders and loggers as, "us Anglos."

How many times has the richness of cultures been beneficial to a conversation?

One example may arise in the discussion of "undocumented aliens from Mexico and other American nations," as one more of the current Cultural Sequence groups. This may be moving along rapidly with a mainstream discussion of legal and social issues; I may then ask one of the Indian students, whose nation lives both in Mexico and the United States, what he or she thinks about what has been said. Or, I will ask one of the Mexican or Central American students how this matter is perceived in their nations. While the discussion sometimes gets hot, it stays productive, and we always are given perspectives that are not normally thought about when the subject is argued among US citizens. My role as discussion moderator here is to see to it that more ways of seeing rather than fewer are made visible.

I may make a comment about something which I have read and an Indian student will say, for instance, "Well, that may be true with the Navajos but not with us Apaches, even though we are related. We live in another part of the state and the color symbolisms are not the same." And I, having just had my horizons expanded, will say, "Thank you, Lloyd, I did not know that. Please tell us more

about the color usages of the Apache, and then let us see where the comparisons and contrasts are." Suddenly I have become the student, and Lloyd, the Apache student, has become the teacher or facilitator of the subject. Not only do we learn the specifics, but the social dynamic has changed, and the Pima, the Hopi, the Yavapai, Mohave, and Cocopah class members are now open to sharing their own visions and opinions.

Had I been lecturing on the subject of Indigenous Color Usage in my didactic voice, native cultural courtesy would have let me continue my own vista without interruption, without comment, and without edifying the rest of us. Instead, the open door to communication afforded in the dialogue among co-learners establishes even further possibilities both for in-class and out-of-class utilization of the resource persons who are members of our course. Even with a subject in which I am very well read and have published in, the number of times a student raises a point which has never occurred to me helps further the learning experiences. Every time I say, "I did not know that before, thank you," additional doors and windows fly open for all of us.

When class is over, there is extensive chatter among those who have already been discussing the subject and it continues out into the hallway, into the dining halls and elsewhere. At least, that is what students tell me. Some send me e-mails after class, others will say that the course bugs them because they cannot stop thinking about it. Yet others come and tell me with surprise in their voices that the principles we are using are also applicable to several other courses they are taking. I sometimes feign surprise, but after all, if in our universe all things are related, is it not highly reasonable for the elements of learning to be common to all fields?

Between the textbook and the models, there is plenty to design learning experiences from. Moreover, since students frequently create projects for a course and leave them with me, I have an ample supply of examples that we can examine and otherwise engage in. Students seem very willing to enter a discussion of something created by other students, and once engrossed, can extract the principles, discuss them, and then transfer them to other topics.

Class time, in other words, is so valuable that it should provide an opportunity for individual learning growth in every conceivable aspect of thinking about and interpreting the subject, arguing which interpretation is most supported by the evidence, comparing the various information sources providing the evidence, and relating the explanations to schools of thought and interpretation spectrum.