Teaching Observation Reflection

I acted as the lead TA for CEE 201 (Engineering Systems and Economics) during the spring and fall terms of 2014. This class is required by all civil engineering majors and primarily consist of sophomore students. The course covers foundational concepts applicable to all sub-disciplines within civil engineering. Given its more general nature, I found that my students were not as excited about the course and its material as they were with more discipline specific courses I had assisted with previously. Therefore, a key challenge was to engage students and get them excited about the course.

During my discussion style class, I focused on reiterating core concepts, collaboratively working through example problems with students, and creating a more interactive and comfortable learning environment for students who struggled with the traditional, large-lecture teaching approach used by the professor. In general, I worked with students who struggled with the course material; that is not to say that they did poorly in the class, rather they needed to spend more time outside the primary lecture to master the material. Thus, a primary goal of my instruction time was to find out what my students were struggling with and then adjust my lecture to meet their needs and catch them up with the rest of their classmates. I found that active learning strategies best helped me achieve the goals of this course because it allowed the students to help guide what was covered in the class.

During my two semesters as a TA for CEE 201 I had two faculty members and a CITL consultant evaluate my teaching and provide guidance, which was both constructive and encouraging. Overall, my observers had very positive feedback. In the future, I plan to not only seek advice from experienced faculty and CITL consultants but also to record my lectures. Although my observers’ advice was much appreciated and encouraging, I feel that much of the focus was on what I was already doing well, not on what I need to improve upon. Therefore, I hope that I can evaluate my teaching with a more critical eye in hopes of improving my teaching and student learning.

The observers said that I had a good pace to my instruction and guided student discussion so to bring out the most important concepts and clarify points of confusion. They thought I found a good balance between using the board, slides, and discussion within my instruction. Although they thought that my content was good, my explanations were clear, and my examples were helpful, the transitions between topics and my overall organization of the class could be improved. This advice lead me to create mapping slides for each presentation, which allowed the students to see what we had covered thus far, what we were discussing now, and what will be covered later.
All of my observers commented on the “personable and comfortable” atmosphere that I fostered within my classroom. Creating a classroom where students feel empowered to interact with me and other students is something that I put a lot of effort into and that I take great pride. I believe this starts with first developing relationship with students and establishing the expectation early in the course that everyone is expected to participate. My observers made note of the excellent classroom participation.

Although my observers were complimentary of the level of student participation, one observer felt that the active learning style I utilized in my teaching needed a little more structure. It is difficult to strike a balance between the rigidness of formal lecture-style teaching approaches and more loosely structured participatory approaches. One suggestion was to have pre-prepared discussion questions written out within my slides (instead of just asking them verbally) so students could study the questions and ponder on them. I thought this was a great suggestion and one that I implemented in future classes.

Another adjustment I made after my observation was how I interacted with students. When posing a question I sometimes did not allow enough time to pass before revealing the answer. This was a key insight that one observer, as well as a student, brought forward that I was not even aware I was doing. In the following classes, I tried to keep a “mental timer” to allow more time to pass before I helped the students. This allowed the students to wrestle with the material longer, which lead to great insights from the students, some of which I had not even considered, once I gave them more time to reflect on my question.

In conclusion, I believe the feedback provided by faculty members and the CITL consultant were of great benefit to my growth as a teacher. Having experienced teachers tell me that I’m doing a great job is extremely encouraging and inspires me to further refine the things that I’m already doing well. In addition, this experience shed light on areas where I can make improvement, many of which I was not even aware were a weakness. It was exciting to implement their advice and further improve my teaching. I look forward to continually improving my teaching and hopefully I will one day be able to offer the same assistance to new teachers as my observers offered me.