

Teaching with an Entourage

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Abstract

Attempting to provide support for students alone may not be the most effective approach. A ‘teaching entourage’ has the potential to make studying more enjoyable and effective in the classroom, as well as enabling a variety of beneficial learning opportunities beyond. This short paper aims to identify a ‘teaching entourage’ and suggest steps for developing a stronger one. Examples are given to show how the contagious enthusiasm of a few students can be harnessed to have a significant impact on the surprising number of students.

The EFL Teacher Journeys conference is special as it encourages holistic and long-term reflection, as opposed to focusing on shorter studies conducted in very specific contexts. Every teacher is continuously developing and refining his or her unique style. Recently, a colleague joked that mine has evolved to include an entourage. What I took to be normal, he saw as distinctive.

Yet, without my so-called entourage, I probably wouldn’t have been able to do much beyond my basic teaching duties. It wouldn’t have been possible to establish an official tutoring program within the university’s curriculum. We wouldn’t have triple the achievement gains of our remedial English program and turn it into a sought after learning opportunity. Without an entourage, it wouldn’t be possible to raise the average GPA by providing freshmen with one hour of personalized academic support for

any subject. Without it, we wouldn’t be doing outreach programs to help Jr. High school students study for final exams or visiting other universities to help start new tutoring programs. To go into detail on all of these programs is beyond the scope of this paper. However, without an entourage, I wouldn’t love my job nearly as much.

With that in mind, this short paper provides readers with a framework for reflecting on their own teaching practices, specifically on the extent to which they work with students. In this paper, I aim to define what a ‘teaching entourage’ is, outline how to develop one, and share some of the potential benefits of such practices.

Defining a ‘Teaching Entourage’

The oxford dictionary defines an entourage as “a group of people attending or surrounding an important person” (2013). In a classroom, the teacher is important. However, the teacher’s

primary concern is often to attend the learning needs of the students. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, a ‘teaching entourage’ will be defined as those working with the teacher to attend the learning needs of the students. If the teacher is the sole provider of support, there is no teaching entourage. If the teacher encourages cooperative learning, provides training on how to be an effective supporter, and the students actively help each other, there is a strong teaching entourage.

Of course, there are many varieties and degrees of support to consider, as well as the extent to which students are cooperating with the teacher. However, from the teacher’s perspective, it may be sufficient for general reflective purposes to use the cline in Figure 1 to gauge the approximate strength of a teaching entourage.

Let students know you want them to succeed

Letting students know you care about them and want them to succeed is the foundation for creating a strong teaching entourage. Brophy (2004) points out, “Motivation to learn tends to be high when students perceive their teachers as involved with them (liking them, sympathetic and responsive to their needs)”(p.28). For example, telling a student, who is at risk of failing, that it would break my heart to fail him and that I would like to help him pass is often enough to make us a team with a common purpose, instead of opposing forces.

It isn’t difficult to extend this practice to start building a more caring and supportive community. When a student is absent, asking one of her friends to call and see if she is okay is an easy thing to do. It also serves as a wake-up

Teaching mostly
alone (weak)

Teaching
with students
(strong)

Figure 1: Gauging the strength of a teaching entourage.

call. When the student shows up, asking another student to help her catch up on what she missed further adds to the feeling that she is cared for and supported. These small acts can have a surprisingly strong impact.

Create a Shared Vision

Creating a common goal or shared vision is the next step to creating a strong teaching entourage. Sinek (2009) found that inspirational speeches consistently focus on why something is important, as opposed to what to do or how to do it. In the classroom, it is too easy to simply instruct students to open to the desired page and talk them through the instructions. This is not an inspiring practice. Before starting an activity, it is important to talk about why you are asking students to do something. Giving students a choice between activities or co-constructing goals may also make the experience more meaningful than merely dictating goals.

It may also be worth taking a bigger step back. Why do you teach? Is it a reason others would be enthusiastic to support? For me, I think learning is usually fun, but I’ve noticed that’s not always true for studying. Formal education can take the joy out of learning. As a teacher, I want to put it back. By inspiring and empowering students, I hope to make studying more enjoyable and effective. I’ve found that communicating my overall aim with students, teachers, and administrators before discussing a new idea has often lead to more enthusiastic responses.

Notice Opportunities for Students to Contribute

It is not difficult to find opportunities for students to actively support each other. Think of

all the things you do and then ask yourself if you are the only person who can do them. Even small things like turning on the heater or passing out papers can make students feel useful, especially when they receive praise for their efforts and sense genuine appreciation.

Noticing opportunities for students to help may lead to deviations from more traditional classroom procedures. For example, I try to be the last person to answer questions in class or avoid answering if possible. When a student asks me a question, I redirect the question to their partner and give him or her a chance to answer. Students quickly learn to ask their partners, then other groups, and if multiple groups don't know, then I'll explain to the student who originally asked and let him or her be the expert to teach others. Alternatively, I might challenge the class to figure it out before the next lesson for a few bonus points. This practice streamlines questions that only I can answer, develops autonomous learning skills, and creates opportunities to reinforce what students already know.

Finding new roles and responsibilities may have the added benefit of keeping the class more engaging over long periods of time. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggests that people are happiest working on tasks while in a state between anxiety and boredom, which he calls flow. As a person's skills increase the level of challenge or difficulty must also increase to maintain a state of flow. For students who grasp the material, giving them the chance to explain it may increase the level of challenge.

Train Students to be Effective Helpers

As students become more skilled, challenging them to help each other understand more effectively is one appropriate way to keep them in the flow state. When I ask my students whom they understand best, they usually reach a consensus

when someone says, "myself". So, rather than explaining something, it is more effective to ask questions that encourage other people to explain things to themselves. There are many ways to do this. For example, to help people feel comfortable attempting to explain something they don't understand completely, it is important to avoid negative criticism and to praise effort (Kamins & Dweck, 1999). It is important to practice active listening techniques (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). It is also important to ask clarifying questions to pinpoint exactly what is difficult to understand and ask them what they think it means. Asking where or how to find the answer is a good way to avoid forming dependency issues when they really don't know. This list of techniques is only a small part of a 15-week tutor-training course students reported to be useful. The techniques are all very simple, yet extremely effective.

Not only will challenging students to become more effective helpers keep them engaged, but it will also prepare them for the future. Whether they become doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, store managers, or parents, they will be responsible for helping others understand new information and procedures (Goodlad, 1998). Again, if students understand why learning to help others is an important skill, they will likely be enthusiastic to learn and to practice. In addition, they may really enjoy it. It feels good to help others. It feels good to have a sense of purpose. It feels good to be appreciated.

Transcend to a Learning Entourage

Students are capable of teaching with you. They are also capable learning with you. Let them help push the boundaries of knowledge, develop programs, manage programs, research, or enhance lessons. For example, after several semesters of tutoring remedial English, a small number of students had truly mastered the simple and powerful tutoring techniques. It was beginning

to get a little boring for them. We still shared a passion to make studying more enjoyable and effective, but they needed a new challenge.

When asked about the next challenge, the students wanted to extend the tutoring program to offer support for other subjects. I briefly introduced how to do action research, another transferable skill for their future professions. They set up pilot studies to determine the best way to extend the tutoring program to support other subjects. They found one hour a week was comfortable for language studies, but too much for other subjects. They recommended studying multiple subjects in one session. The following semester, we supported groups of incoming freshman using their recommendation. It worked. The freshmen with tutors had slightly higher grades on average and very positive comments about the study sessions.

Many of the freshmen that received help wanted to become tutors the following year. Rather than limit the program to what I could manage on top of my regular teaching duties, the older students took over most of the responsibility for managing and continued development of the new program. The program quadrupled in size to support about half the freshman class, about 120 students. The feedback is still extremely positive and we are learning and improving faster than ever due to the large quantity of feedback. We hope to support all the new freshmen next year. The older students have designed original tutor-training materials and even trained new student managers. They continue to look for ways to improve and to expand, including outreach programs for anyone interested!

Conclusion

Teaching with an entourage is about working with others to meet the learning needs of your students. Showing students you want them to succeed provides a supportive emotional

foundation. Taking time to discuss why an activity is important will generate enthusiasm, create shared vision, and enable teamwork. These two steps are meant to inspire students. Once they are eager to make an effort, maintain a state of flow by finding appropriate challenges to keep them engaged as their skills increase. Continue to challenge and empower students by training them to help each other and themselves. These are things that can be done within a classroom. Setting up a more formal peer-support system is one way to extend it beyond the classroom. Finally, welcoming students to search for better ways of doing things with you can be a wonderful experience for both you and your students. Teaching with an entourage is fun and learning with an entourage is even better!

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