

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

A Case Study of the Use of "Teaching the Conflicts" Pedagogy in the Course
"Contemporary Theory" and its Impact on the English Teachers
who Took Part in the Course

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Abstract

This work analyzes the fall semester 2013 course “Contemporary Theory” in the English Department of Bar-Ilan University. This course was chosen because it utilized the unique "Teaching the Conflicts" method. The course had specific pedagogical components meant to alter the instructional approach of the English teachers who took part in it, in order to improve the teaching of English in Israeli schools.

"Teaching the Conflicts"

The "Teaching the Conflicts" approach was first suggested in the early 1990's by Gerald Graff. Graff, an American professor of English and an educational critic, believed that the structure of academic life does not adequately allow students to become active partners in the academic research venture. He saw the main deficiency as each professor teaching his own approach to the discipline, rather than teaching the conflicts within the discipline which are the fuel of academic life.

Out of this supposition came Graff's suggestion to teach the disciplinary conflicts themselves to students, even at the undergraduate level. "Teaching the conflicts" means exposing the students to the variety of theories that exist in the discipline; teaching them the language used in disciplinary discussions and the key phrases in each theory's jargon; and encouraging students to respond to the different theories by stating their personal opinion about relevant issues. The most effective way to “teach the conflicts” is by creating a community of learners of both students and instructors.

In the case of English literature, students read several critical studies about a specific literary work, each representing a different theoretical approach. The instructor explains the key terminology of each theory, points out the rhetorical maneuvers the critics use and provides the student with templates to guide them in preparing their own critical essays.

This approach encourages student expression in order to make them active participants in the academic discussion of English literature.

While the "Teaching the Conflicts" approach was controversial, it was implemented at different sites in the United States and around the world, including the English Department of Bar-Ilan University.

The Course “Contemporary Theory”

The course “Contemporary Theory” is required of all graduate students in the English and Translation Departments. Half of the participants, in the Fall 2013 course, were English teachers. The distinct features of the "Teaching the Conflicts" approach include:

1. The main goal was to acquaint the students with prominent literary theories by reading a variety of critical essays on two masterpieces, *Sherlock Holmes* and *Hamlet*. The instructor clarified the differences and similarities of each theory and explained the basic terminology of each.
2. The course had undergraduate students as well (by invitation).
3. The course incorporated the teaching of academic writing according to Graff's method, using Graff and Birkenstein's book (2008) *They Say/I Say*.
4. Rather than being a frontal lecture, class time was primarily a discussion based on sharing opinions, personal responses to texts and clarifications of ideas. These discussions were enriched by digital resources which helped create an active community of learners even prior to the classroom meetings.

Research Questions

1. What are the characteristics of the "Teaching the Conflicts" approach observed in the course, both inside the classroom and in other course settings?

2. How was the "Teaching the Conflicts" approach modified for an Israeli academic population?
3. What are the perceptions of English teachers enrolled in the course, concerning
 - a) The role of English literature in language teaching and pupil learning, ways of teaching English literature, and the need to teach English literature in Israel.
 - b) Their role as English teachers.
 - c) The use of conflicts as an educational and pedagogical tool for active learning.
4. Did taking part in the course affect these perceptions?

Methodology

This research utilizes a case-study approach in which the "case" is the "Contemporary Theory" course. I attended several class sessions as a participant-observer. Four of the seven English teachers enrolled in the course agreed to be interviewed, both at the beginning and at the end of the course. I also interviewed the course instructor. In addition, I collected and analyzed relevant documents: the class syllabus, reflective letters, final papers and textbooks. I also analyzed the virtual correspondence on the class Google-Groups site.

Results

The course indeed implemented major components of the "Teaching the Conflicts" approach, including its three basic principles: revealing the structure of the academic argument, teaching the language of argument and encouraging students to join the argument. The main goal of the approach in the Israeli academic setting was to make the students active participants, rather than passive listeners. Also, to develop the students' ability to discuss ideas in an orderly and respectful manner, different from the usual combative Israeli discourse.

While the content of the course was not changed specifically for the Israeli audience, the teaching methods were, in order to make it easier for students to understand the variety of theories.

Participants' perceptions of the course and its impact can be summarized in five categories.

1. English literature and its teaching in schools. All the teachers in the course agreed English literature is an important part of English language instruction, but not all of them agreed that Israeli pupils benefit from it. The difficulties and frustration involved in literature studies in ESL classes and the use of literature as a platform for language teaching rather than in-depth literature learning, led most of the teachers to suggest that literature be only an optional part of the English language curriculum. Only a few teachers see teaching literature in English language classes as vital and the very core of English language instruction.
2. The role of the teacher. The interviewees defined themselves around three axes: the ideal teacher, the educational system and the pupils. Half of the interviewees' conception of the ideal teacher changed during the course. Initially, they portrayed the ideal teacher as a classic frontal instructor with no class management problems, because they were respected and even revered by the students. After the course, their perception of their own teaching effectiveness and their sense of self-efficiency improved. They came to accept their own interactive teaching style as legitimate and even ideal.
3. Learning, learners and using conflicts in class. The interviewees described learning as a personal experience arising from the interaction with the content, the classmates and the teacher. This experience brings the learner to a deeper

understanding of the reality he lives in. The interviewees believed that part of learning literature is how to cope with different situations in life, including conflicts. At first, most of them were against incorporating conflicts in their teaching. They claimed it would confuse and even harm the pupils. At the end of the course, objections to the conflict approach had softened and some came to see using conflict as the best way to teach English literature.

4. The course: goals, content and teaching methods. The course goals were to have a survey of contemporary theories, strengthen academic writing skills and present different ways of teaching. The goals were clear to the students though the interviewees felt that not all were achieved. They evaluated the content and materials as appropriate, but the volume of reading and the difficulty of the articles did not lead to full understanding of the material. On the other hand, they said the writing part of the course was helpful. They tried to use the teaching methods they were exposed to in the course, in their own classroom teaching.
5. A community of learning teachers. The interviewees stated that previous attempts in their schools of collegial cooperation had not been successful, nor did they think communities of learning teachers would actually advance their own professional work.

Conclusions

The research conclusions regarding the “Teaching the Conflicts” approach are:

1. For some teachers, the approach had a substantial positive effect on their sense of teaching effectiveness and self-efficiency. The instructor had an important part in that.

2. In order to change teacher effectiveness, a professional development course should utilize the desired pedagogic methods. The focus of such courses must be modeling how content knowledge should be taught in the same way teachers will teach it. The courses should be academic in nature, but with a clear pedagogical orientation and taught by an instructors who are themselves researchers.

3. To impact teacher perceptions and skills, long-term, intensive exposure to new teaching methods and course content are necessary.

These conclusions are similar to those of other research, reinforcing the contribution that “Teaching the Conflicts” might make in classroom instruction.