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Assignment 1: Observation, Interview, and Analysis of a Teacher

Introduction – Please allow me to introduce Ms. Elma Alosté Catalino. She is originally from the Philippines, and currently working at Ratchapat University in Thailand. She is a first-year teacher in the Math department. She teaches an additional English course for freshmen students. The aim is for her students to better understand Math when it is being taught in English as opposed to their native language.

- Briefly describe the context or setting of your teaching.
Elma: I teach in a standard sized classroom with groups of about 35 students. My position is to teach them basic Math subjects in English.
- What is the overall aim or purpose of your teaching?
Elma: I want my students to learn and apply to any situation they can. I hope my teaching will help them in many ways in the future.
- How would you describe or characterize the nature of the students with which you work?
Elma: They remind me a lot of high school students really. There are times when they can be quite serious, but also times when they are talkative and naughty, especially the boys. They have different personalities. I think you call it different intelligences, like they're good at some things and not at others.
- What is the nature of the content that is taught in this setting?
Elma: Very basic concepts. The Thai teachers teach the advanced concepts. I try to focus on what they can understand and work from there.
- What methods or strategies are most effective in helping you address the overall aims or purposes of your teaching? How the teacher goes about teaching?
Elma: I try to use some activities in my lessons. Many of the students cannot understand everything I'm saying, so I try to show them. I use student centered learning over lecture most of the time.
- What do you consider to be the key challenges in being a good teacher within your practice setting?
Elma: After 1 year of teaching here I'm more comfortable. The problem I run into sometimes is with the students understanding me. Sometimes I have a really fun activity planned and they don't understand the rules. I feel a little bit guilty if the lesson doesn't go as planned.

In viewing Ms. Elma Alosté Catalino's I would like to start with some more technical observations I made and then lead into more situational and anecdotal observations. She is a good acquaintance of mine, and I will refer to her as Elma moving forward for brevity.

Brooker (2013) wrote about critical thinking perspectives and gave an example where he would not answer a student's question directly, but rather he would give them three answers to consider. I found a similarity while reading Palmer (1998) where he quoted a physician, "Mostly it's getting out of the way and resisting the natural tendency to give them the answer and show them how smart I am. That really stops learning!" (p.45). Elma appears to display Developmental Perspective tendencies when she is teaching. There is a brief introduction and Power Point to show key terminology, but most of the period is dedicated to students practicing her examples in small groups and then writing examples on the white board. As she stated to me later in our interview, this is by design. She resists the tendency to answer one student's individual question, fearing that most of the other students (75% she estimates) may not understand the answer verbally. It is better to put answers into practice.

After Elma's lesson, which was about frequency, I asked one of her student's if they had learned the subject matter before, or if this was new for them. He said he was familiar with the word *frequency*, and knows he studied it at some point in the past, but couldn't remember much else. He was sure he remembered the term, but not it's application. I wondered whether he would be able to remember things this time moving forward. He seemed reassured and confident that he would be able to, commenting that *Teacher Elma* made things easier for him to understand. This reminded me of something I came across in *From Teaching to Learning*. Barr & Tagg (specifically Barr) wrote, "In only two, albeit intense, days, I relearned – or really learned for the first time – two semesters of calculus. During those days, I wondered how I ever thought calculus was difficult and why I didn't see the Limit Theorem and derivative for the simple, obvious things they are" (p.22). Barr suggests that later in life

individuals bring with them and intellectual framework when learning. I believe I could see some of this when speaking with the young man I was questioning.

Another aspect this same interaction made me consider was the idea of mastery when learning subject matter. I brought this up in our interview. Elma said she was relieved that in her position she was able to set the pace for the content herself. If there was ever a section she covered where she thought more time was warranted, she was free to review the material again with individuals or the whole class. Again, she wants her course to be useful for her students and has a desire for all her students to feel comfortable with the material.

In *The Heart of a Teacher* by Parker J. Palmer there is a riveting section entitled *An Anatomy of Fear*. This section gave me a lot to reflect upon when viewing my own philosophies on teaching. Palmer opines, “When a class that has gone badly comes to a merciful end, I am fearful long after it is over – fearful that I am not just a bad teacher but a bad person, so closely is my sense of self tied to what I do” (p.37). I’ve had these feelings before – fearful that I am the only one who can’t do a good enough job for my students despite my best efforts. On a psychological level I think it relates to the Nurturing Perspective, which I now know to be one of my stronger inclinations. I liked how (unprompted) Elma seemed to have this same fear located somewhere within her. It made for a really nice end to our interview, because I was able to reassure her that many of us feel this way and she should not feel guilty. I have Mr. Palmer to thank for that realization.

One final reflection I would like to make about Elma’s teaching style is that it’s progressive but not (and I do want to use this word) flashy. I don’t mean to say it’s boring for the students, not at all. There was a great deal of laughter and carrying on in her lesson. I believe sometimes the term “progressive” in education has makes it sound like the classroom is full of so much more excitement than the old boring lecture hall. Where students are having explosive educational breakthroughs and

teachers are there beside them cheering into the microphone like some over-the-top football announcer. That's not what I observed in Elma's classroom. What I observed was a carefully laid out lesson plan, followed by some examples, and a class full of students who were willing to put them into practice without having to ask the teacher for all the answers afterwards because they know they had done things correctly and mastered the topic. Simple and to the point – no fuss.

It was a pleasure to be in Ms. Elma Alosté Catalino's classroom for an afternoon. Through watching and interviewing her I feel that I learned a little bit more about teaching, and perhaps a little bit more about myself. The readings and class discussions proved useful when applied to a real-life scenario and this was appreciated. I feel she will move on to be a fine educator in her field in the future.

References

- Barr, Robert B., and Tagg, John (1995) *From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education*. Taylor & Francis, Ltd.
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