Signature Pedagogy of English Education:  
The Bridge Between Students and Teachers

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Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of having a standard guideline for the methods in which a teacher will utilize to teach their content area. Otherwise known as the signature pedagogy, this guideline will vary from subject area to subject area. I identify the signature pedagogy for English education, and I define it as a communicative relationship between teacher and students. The English pedagogy allows for the respectful sharing of ideas in order to advance student understanding of the subject area. As English is a subjective content area, students’ thoughts and opinions will vary, and there will be more than one way to interpret a text. Teachers must be prepared to accommodate these differences and allow for adequate discussion.

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The primary goal of an English teacher is to teach students to read and write at a higher level in order to communicate effectively. Subsequently, students learn to understand others when they convey their own messages, whether they are written or verbal. But what is the best way to get students to learn to communicate? The answer can be explained by the concept of the signature pedagogy. Expert Lee Shulman, author of “Signature Pedagogies in the Professions” (2005), states, “Signature pedagogies are important precisely because they are pervasive. They implicitly define what counts as knowledge in a field and how things become known. They define how knowledge is analyzed, criticized, accepted, or discarded.” Teachers require general guidelines in order to effectively teach their students. Likewise, a general standard needs to be made for all teachers according to their respective subject area. This promotes a sense of academic unity and creates an equal level for all teachers to reach, regardless of their location. I contest that the signature pedagogy, general standard, and best way for an English teacher to teach their students how to communicate is to do just that. The teacher must correspond with and establish a relationship with their students in order to share ideas and work as a collaborative group to achieve the ultimate goal of learning and understanding.

This shared teaching and learning responsibility that becomes the English education signature pedagogy entirely promotes and encourages student involvement. Shulman (2005) writes, “Another feature of signature pedagogies is that they nearly always entail public student performance.” This statement shifts the focus from the teacher to the student. It tends to seem like the teacher is on a stage performing the lesson to their audience, or students. This should not be the case. There should be a dynamic relationship between the teacher and the student that allows for adequate conversation between both parties. Ideas and feelings need to be shared in order to have a successful classroom environment. Thus, a solely lecture-style English class would most likely fail because it would allow for minimal student participation. Teachers cannot talk on and on and expect their students to feel like they are being involved. Discussion-based classes would be the most beneficial to the students. They would get the opportunity to share their thoughts with the teacher and the class, and the teacher would able to gauge the students’ current level of understanding and provide appropriate instruction and feedback. This form of communication allows students to practice their command of the English language, which is necessary to becoming a better speaker, reader, and writer.

Ernest Morrell, author of “Critical English Education,” writes, “Language is foundational to all learning. Whether it is the medium for the communication of our thoughts or whether it comes from the texts we consume and produce, there is little doubt that we are constructed and we construct ourselves through language” (Morrell, 2005). The actual linguistic component of English is key in defining a signature pedagogy of the teaching of the subject area. Without language, we would not be able to pinpoint the specific needs of the academic discipline, nor would we be able to carry them out. Teachers construct themselves through practicing their profession. They construct lessons through their knowledge and practice, and, subsequently, their students construct themselves from those teachings. A sufficient level of communication is necessary to the accurate execution of the pedagogy to educate students. If a teacher notices that their methods are not effective, they may change their behavior to ensure maximum learning potential. Likewise, students can speak to their teacher if they are having difficulty with any aspect of the lesson. It is necessary that both the teacher and student have a solid understanding of the lesson and each other. The best way to learn communication is by practicing it. Thus, clarity is extremely important on both the teacher and students’ behalf.

Keeping the idea of clarity in mind, Morrell (2005) also writes, “A critical English education is explicit about the role of language and literacy in conveying meaning and in promoting or disrupting existing power relations.” A teacher has the power to either be a dictator or a fair figure of authority. The students may fall victim to a strict teacher who does not allow for adequate opportunities for them to share their thoughts. On the other hand, the students and teacher could have a pleasant relationship in which they coexist on a mutual, respectful level and are able to freely share their ideas. The English signature pedagogy allows for the latter. It promotes appropriate academic discussion in which teachers and students can express their personal opinions regarding texts and concepts. This is a learning experience in and of itself. Teachers and students become primary resources, much like the texts they teach and study from. A wealth of knowledge is added to the classroom environment just by communicating by word of mouth. “Those who believe in a critical English education see language and literacy learning as political acts…and recognize literacy educators as political agents capable of developing skills which enable academic transformation and social change” (Morrell, 2005). Teachers have the power to control their classes for the better. They shape lessons according to the students’ exact needs, provided the students help to give feedback when possible. This teacher-student relationship is absolutely vital to the success of the students.

It is not always easy for students to develop a relationship with their teacher, for personalities differ. Likewise, sometimes it is more difficult for some students than others to open up to an entire class, let alone the teacher. This is where the signature pedagogy is key to promoting comfort within the classroom. It becomes the teacher’s job to create a positive environment where students can share without the fear of being judged or ignored. This idea can fit into any subject pedagogy, but it is especially important in English education. English is a very subjective topic, and, most of the time, there is more than one correct response or reaction to a text. As students differ, so will their responses. Chris Golde, author of “Signature Pedagogies in Doctoral Education: Are They Adaptable for the Preparation of Education Researchers?” states that “writing well and with confidence, particularly about others’ work, is a challenge for many students” (Golde, 2007). Not only will students have to complete written responses to texts, but they will have to verbalize their reactions as well. It is the teacher’s duty to help students gain confidence to trust and voice their opinions. This is a huge component of the signature pedagogy. Confidence will help students become more comfortable in developing their writing and speaking voices. Developing a voice is absolutely essential as an English learner because it distinguishes individuals as speakers and writers. Students will notice this as they share with each other in discussions, and the teacher will observe changes and growth as well. The signature pedagogy allows for individual growth through the lens of an entire group.

As Golde (2007) writes, “Contributions to literature and analysis spring from the imagination of the individual.” Each student brings a different perspective to the class. They will provide information and views that others have not known or thought of, and the teacher will learn as well. It is necessary to the development of students that the teacher promotes constant communication within an English education classroom. Likewise, it is necessary to the development of the teacher that they are able to observe the various competency levels of the students in order to make changes to their lessons or teaching style in the case of misunderstanding. The varying degrees of imagination between the students may mean that the teacher will have to consider simpler tasks for the students to complete. Or perhaps, the students will benefit from a more creative task. Any major discrepancies between the teacher and students should raise concern for the teacher to change their methods, and the communicative nature of the English education signature pedagogy allows for that.

The signature pedagogy of the English education as I have defined it is incredibly democratic. The teacher stands as the central authority figure, but the students have the ability and are encouraged to participate as much as possible in the areas that concern them. The guideline that promotes interpersonal communication within the classroom simultaneously encourages intrapersonal communication within the students as they develop their linguistic skills. By sharing their thoughts with others, they learn what works and what may need improvement in the triumvirate of their reading, writing, and English speaking knowledge. In addition to building a strong relationship with their peers, the students have the opportunity to connect with their teacher. Communicating effectively will ensure a high level of success for the students as learners of English and the teacher as a master of English and education. The flexibility of the signature pedagogy leaves room for change for teachers to revise their methods accordingly to the needs of their students, promising maximum learning potential.

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