Peer Feedback, Problems, Teacher Roles and the Learning Process

PAULA K. ALINSANGAN

Abstract

Through peer feedback or peer reviews, students work in small groups to read each other's compositions and give comments and suggestions for improvement. Aside from the benefit of receiving help to improve their compositions, students benefit from peer feedback in many other ways: they develop a sense of audience, they hone their critical ability, they develop a sense of responsibility, cooperation and trust, etc. However, doing peer feedback may not be that easy. In this article, the author presents the problems that she has encountered in using peer feedback with freshman college students. These problems involve socio-affective, communicative and cognitive problems. She also presents some practical decisions she has made in dealing with these problems. In her experiences of trying to find out ways and means to make peer feedback work, she has understood better the multiple roles of the teacher and the learning process. For her, using peer feedback as a teaching technique has been a learning experience.

Given the many claims about the advantages of peer feedback to help learners improve their compositions, my experiences with freshman college students show that engaging in this activity involves more problems than one can imagine and that dealing with these problems requires tremendous efforts both from the teacher and students before some measure of success can be

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PAULA K. ALINSANGAN, former chair of the English Department, CASS, finished her M.A. in English from St. Louis University in 1976. Currently, she is a doctoral candidate in Language Teaching, University of the Philippines, Diliman.

expected. In helping students deal with these problems, I have come up with some practical decisions, sometimes after going through trial and error and experiencing some disappointments. At the same time, I have come to a fuller understanding of the multiple roles of the teacher and of the nature of the learning process. Before sharing my experiences, I shall first describe the role of feedback in language learning and present the advantages of peer feedback.

The Role of Feedback in Language Learning

Feedback has long been recognized as an important variable in language acquisition (Chaudron, 1988). Within the behaviorist theory of language learning, feedback serves as a reinforcement or a deterrence in developing language habits. Within the cognitive view, feedback serves as input for learners to reconstruct their interlanguage by accepting or rejecting hypotheses that they have formed about language.

Feedback can come in any form: substitute forms to replace errors, verbal expressions like questions for clarification, corrections, comments and suggestions and nonverbal expressions such as simple displays of comprehension or lack of comprehension and gestures showing approval or disapproval. In explaining the role of feedback in the fossilization of errors, Vigil and Oller (1976) present a model for feedback. Within the model, feedback may be affective or cognitive; it may also be positive, negative or neutral. Positive affective feedback helps sustain learners' desire to continue using the target language; negative affective feedback aborts this desire. The degree by which learners internalize what they learned about the target language depends on cognitive feedback. Negative or neutral cognitive feedback, as long as there is positive affective, makes learners revise their hypotheses about language and reformulate their language. Positive cognitive feedback confirms their hypotheses and make them conclude that their language is correct. Vigil and Oller's model has important implication for error correction. In giving feedback to learner errors, teachers should consider both the affective and cognitive dimensions.

Feedback is as important in writing as it is in speaking. Through feedback, writers enhance their reprocessing and revision strategies and consequently improve their writing. Feedback for revision purposes can be appropriated to students in four ways: teacher's written comments, teacher-student dialogue using a self-monitoring technique, teacher-student conference and peer feedback. Traditional practice points to the teacher as solely responsible for providing feed-

back to student's compositions, a task which can be burdensome for teachers who handle many writing classes. As a result, they may end up giving only superficial feedback and even asking their students too few writing assignments.

A promising alternative to enhancing students' revision strategies is peer feedback (peer activity, peer response or peer conferencing). In peer feedback, students work either in pairs or in small groups, read each other's work and discuss how their papers may be improved. They may write their comments and suggestions first before discussing.

Advantages of Peer Feedback

Many claims have been made about the advantages of peer feedback. For teachers, the most important advantage of peer feedback over teacher comments given either in written form or orally through conferencing is that students can get immediate feedback on their papers. For students, peer feedback can work to their advantage as they play the roles or writer and critic. Aside from being able to see weak areas in their papers through the suggestions that they receive from peers, students can also develop more insights on their papers simply by being asked to explain or justify their claims. Moreover, the exercise in monitoring for errors in their peers' work helps them in monitoring their own.

Keh (1990:294) gives some of the practical advantages of peer feedback:

> It saves teachers' time for certain tasks, freeing them for more helpful instruction. Feedback is considered to be more at the learner's level of development. Learners can gain a greater sense of audience with several readers. The reader learns more about writing through critically reading others' papers. Students are also able to gain conscious awareness that they are writing not just for the teacher. This affects what and how they write. Goal setting becomes clearer. Finally, immediate feedback is available to the reader.

In addition to Keh's observations, we add the following reasons. Peer feedback sessions reflect real life situations where writers ask colleagues and friends to comment on their writing before it is disseminated or published. As future professionals who will likely be writing reports and other forms of communication, students are actually preparing themselves for those times when they will be con-

sulting (or will be consulted by) colleagues on their reports. In addition, peer feedback sessions combine all aspects of communication: writing, reading, listening and speaking. Discussions can become very spontaneous and authentic oral fluency practice involving academic language can be promoted. Finally, peer feedback provides a strong avenue for cooperative learning. It can translate in very real terms, humanistic approaches to education in that lerarners strive to develop their cognitive and creative abilities, along with a sense of responsibility and caring.

Can students who have limited grasp of what makes good writing help their classmates improve their compositions? Describing the advantages one can get from a teacherless class where peers come together to read and respond to each other's writing, Elbow (1973:128) claims that readers who know less about writing than the writer can help. He writes,

> ... these readers give you a better evidence of what is unclear in your writing. They're not just telling you the places where they think your writing is awkward .... They are people telling you where you actually confused them A diverse group of readers constitutes an array of "channels" for "sending your messages across". You find out there is too much static or where the messasge is too weak. Sometimes someone who knows very little about the subject is most useful here.

Problems in the Actual Classroom

Lest we make the assumption that conducting peer feedback promises immediate results, my experiences with freshman college students has shown that engaging in this activity may not be that rosy and that achieving the desired results may take some time. In fact, if the goal of peer feedback is improved compositions, this goal for many students may never be achieved within the semester. There are many problems students will have to learn to deal with before and during peer feedback sessions. Whatever learning they get from dealing with these problems will take some time before they can translate these in tangible terms in their writing.

When I tell my students that they are going to exchange papers and provide comments and suggestions to each other's paper, almost always there is reluctance. In one instance, when I announced that on the next meeting, we were going to do peer feedback, one of my students came to me in private and asked to

be excused from the activity. In other words, students do not usually welcome the idea of showing their papers to fellow students much less give comments and suggestions.

Futhermore, in the actual sessions, one would expect that students would be engaged in animated discussions of their papers. But this does not always happen. While one or two groups would be enthusiastically discussing, the other groups would be mostly quiet throughout the sessions or try to discuss but only minimally and in low voices. When you tell them to use English for practice purposes, the result is even more disastrous: the voices become whispers. Even then, you might think that perhaps they are busy working hard on their written comments. However, inspection of some of their work would show that comments are limited to statements like "You are a good writer", I have no comments" and "I understood everything you wrote". When things like these happen, one starts to wonder why nothing seems to be happening. One begins to ask questions: Where is the negotiation of meaning that is supposed to occur? Where is the feedback needed by the learner to reconstruct his interlanguage? Where are the signs of a critical ability? In those times when I did not understand yet the full import of what it meant for students to do peer feedback, I asked the same questions. Of course, I was disappointed, but I had the good sense of exercising restraint in expressing my disappointment and realized in good time that had I been less patient I would have stifled students' fragile efforts to perform the task I asked them to do. For after all, when I asked them if indeed they gave or received help, most of the time they said they did. Little did I realize that peer feedback required the use of a complex of skills and before students could cope with the cognitive and communicative demands, they had to deal with the socio-affective first and learn to be comfortable with the task and with working with peers.

The most crucial problems that learners will have to deal with even before they engage in their first peer work are socio-affective. As pointed out earlier, many students may be unwilling to do peer feedback at all from the outset. Among Filipino students, there are strong feelings of "hiya" (timidity) which make them reluctant to show their papers to peers. Also, the mismatch between student and teacher perceptions of their roles may also work against peer feedback. Some students think that it is the teacher's job to provide feedback, not theirs. Many students also feel that they do not know how to give suggestions while others lack trust in their peers' ability to provide help (Siddle, 1989). Finally, feelings of competition and the inability to disclose a part of one self (the composition is a personal investment) may be so strong in some students that they are unwilling to

work with their classmates (Benesch, 1986).

Peer feedback is also a cognitively demanding activity. It requires from students the ability to comprehend and intepret what their peers are saying and to follow their line of thought. It requires them to be able evaluate papers in the light of some requirements which may not be so clear to them yet and to formulate appropriate comments and suggestions. Peer feedback is also demanding in terms of the communicative skills it requires from students. Being able to talk about writing requires a special schemata about language and the written composition but which may not yet be available to many students.

Given these problems, what then should the teacher do? Given the general pedagogical tenet that minimal intervention from the teacher allows students to take responsibility for their learning, where does the teacher come in? In my reflections about the roles of the teacher, I came to realize that minimal teacher intervention in student activities did not mean a diminishment of my responsibility. Although peer feedback freed me from the responsibility of reading through every paper and responding to each, it required other forms of responsibility requiring more effort and equally time-consuming but perhaps more valuable in helping students.

Dealing with Problems in Peer Feedback

This section presents some of the decisions I adopted in order to deal with problems in peer feedback. Learning, including language learning, being a problem-solving process (Brow, 1987), my first move was to convert the problems into learning objectives. I have realized that socio-affective problems were the main stumbling block to students' willingness to participate in peer feedback sessions. Hence, addressing these problems is a priority. In other words, effecting a change in student's perceptions, feelings and attitudes is a primary objective.

Dealing with Student's Initial Perceptions

Given the fact that most if not all of my students usually do not have any experience in peer feedback, it is important to deal with their initial perceptions. I usually start with the statement: "Will you be willing to exchange papers and comment on each other's paper's?" While there are some risktakers who will say they are, there are many who register reluctance. Then we go into an analysis of their reasons. For those who are reluctant, their main reason is that they are

"ashamed" because "their classmates will laugh at their mistakes". Ironically, when I ask the class if they will really laugh at their classmates' mistakes, the answer is usually "No!" As a rejoinder, I usually tell them that it's unfair to accuse their classmates without proof but at the same time tell them that it is not their fault if they felt that way. Instead, I put the blame on the teaching profession and apologize. A remnant of audiolingual days, the practice of error-hunting by teachers and of expecting students to produce error-free compositions has made many students insecure about showing their writing to peers.

In the case of the student who wanted to be exempted from peer feedback sessions, I told him that his fears may be unfounded and assured him that his classmates would not embarrass him. Of course, without his knowledge I had to talk in private to two classmates with whom he was going to work, asking them to be kind and supportive during their session. It worked wonders. The student may have been wary during the initial session, but in subsequent sessions he proved to be one of the most enthusiastic participants.

Dealing with Socio Affective Problems

After dealing with students' initial perceptions, we also discuss other problems that naturally go with any novel experience and these are anxiety, nervousness and lack of self-confidence. I explain to them that being able to deal with these is a part of the learning process and is a training for life, even pointing out its relevance to the development of emotional intelligence, that much talked about variable for success. Then we discuss the purpose and advantages of peer feedback. Berg (1991), in her study of the use of peer response groups in writing classes, reported that the success or nonsuccess of these groups depends much on the extent to which she spends time explaining the input of peer response to the writing process and preparing students to give feedback to the writer. She also demonstrated how she used peer response in her own writing, thus, validating the response activity. Likewise, Hoekje (1993/1994:5) pointed out that "when we take time to explain the pegagogical reasons for a group activity, students tend to invest themselves in the activity more deeply". My own experiences attest to this. Explaining the advantages of peer feedback and spending half the period or even the entire period can do wonders in transforming students' initial fears to willingness to take risks.

As follow-up, immediately after the first peer feedback, we discuss students' initial experiences and the problems that they encountered. We also dis-

cuss how these problems can be overcome in future sessions. Sometimes students are open in pointing out problems: feelings of insecurity, nervousness, lack of confidence, being usure of whether their suggestions are correct. Students are also asked to keep a writing journal where they write their reactions or reflections on their sessions. Sometimes problems not brought out in the class discussion are raised in their journals: some students are uneasy with other students because they are better writers or they are "sometimes arrogant" or they seem not "to take me seriously" or they are "unfriendly".

In essence, dealing with socio-affective problems confronting students is a key factor in peer feedback. In this way, the "affective filter" (Krashen, 1982) is lowered, meaning that anxiety is lessened, self-confidence is enhanced and students are motivated to take risks. On the part of the teacher, patience and empathy are required not only at the beginning but every time students do peer feedback.

Teaching students to cope with their socio-affective problems is actually in line with what is called learning strategy training. Learning strategies include metacognitive, cognitive strategies and socio-affective strategies. In Oxford's (1990) list of socio-affective strategies, the following are important in peer feedback sessions: (1) lowering anxiety, (2) self- encouragement, and (3) taking one's emotional temperature. To achieve these, we make resolutions, making use of Oxford's recommendations:

1. To help lower anxiety, be aware of the nature and objectives of working with peers and recognize the affective and social problems that go with it. Use humor and laughter.

2. For self-encouragement, take risks and focus on the benefits that can be obtained from interacting with peers.

3. To deal with emotional experiences, keep a learning diary and even discuss feelings with a friend.

Social strategies which are useful in peer feedback sessions are asking questions (asking for clarification or verification and asking for correction), cooperating with peers in order to perform a given task, and empathizing with others. Students are made aware of these strategies. With regard asking questions, students are encouraged not only to ask questions about their own. In line with

developing empathy, we discuss their feelings about being corrected. I usually ask them: Do you like being corrected? Why or Why not? Their answers are usually "Yes, if the correction is given tactfully" and "No, if the correction is given tactlessly". In other words, students' answers boil down to what has been mentioned at the early part of this paper - the affective dimension of feedback. Then we draw the implication for giving feedback and make two resolutions: (1) Be tactful when providing feedback, and (2) Always remember that no one among you intends to hurt you.

Thus, by discussing different socio-affective strategies, it is hoped that students will expand their views about learning and realize that learning does not just mean getting new information or facts and that a more important form of learning is changing themselves by changing their negative feelings and attitudes to positives ones.

Requiring Students to Keep a Writing Journal

Engaging in metacognition, which means thinking and reflecting about one's learning processes, helps in learning (Oxford, 1990). Thus, I ask students to write in a notebook their experiences in working with their classmates, register their reactions, including the problems that they have encountered and how they coped with these problems. More important, I ask them to spell out whatever learning they had, why they consider it as learning and what made them learn. By engaging in metacognition, students develop a better understanding of their roles and responsibilities in learning. They also realize that ultimately it is they who decide what they can learn and not learn. One is amazed at what students write in their journals and to know that they do learn: they change their perceptions of their classmates, they have become more confident, they have become less shy in later sessions, etc. They also believe that their writing improves with help from peers and that they have learned to become critical of their papers.

Circulating During Peer Feedback Sessions

Teacher's minimal intervention in peer feedback is intended to promote responsibility and learning autonomy among students. How the teacher observes this will depend on her students' ability to do independent work. With some of my students, oftentimes it is necessary to intervene and "to poke your nose" into what they are doing. Thus, during actual peer feedback sessions, while I encourage

students to work on their own resources, I circulate a lot, spelling out my role and telling them that it is my job to make sure that they are performing their roles and to be around in case students have questions to ask. Some students do consult me to check if the suggestions they made or received are right or if they really have to follow the suggestions in which case I tell them that the decision to implement or not to implement is ultimately theirs. Sometimes it is necessary to sit down with some groups to help facilitate the discussion by asking questions and giving encouragement wherever appropriate. Sometimes I get a paper, read through it and help formulate suggestions, or ask the critic to find out whether in a particular part of the text, the writer has made clear his point before explaining or whether the explanation is thorough enough. I had also to be on the alert for possible problems. One time I noticed one seemingly disturbed student. When I asked her how she was, she said she was embarrassed because the other two girls in her group, who happened to be sophisticated city girls coming from the better schools, kept on laughing at the mistakes in her paper. Trying to defend the girls, I tried to tell her that perhaps they were trying to be friendly. I asked her if she wanted me to call their attention, but she said there was no need and that perhaps she had misinterpreted them.

In sum, it is important for the teacher to be available not only for consultation but to intervene when necessary, even pushing some students to exert more effort in studying their peers' drafts. As students grope their way to deal with the tasks required in peer feedback, they need the teacher's support and assistance.

Limiting Objectives For Each Session

Four years ago, I had a very romantic idea of peer feedback and was convinced that it would work wonders. So the first time I tried it, I asked my students to read each other's papers and give suggestions to improve content, organization, grammar, cohesion, vocabulary and mechanics. I expected that their papers would become longer and better organized. To my disappointment, revisions involved merely the corrections of a few grammatical and mechanical errors. In fact, I was so disillusioned and wondered what went wrong. Perhaps they needed a guideline, so the next time I prepared a two-page guideline containing a set of questions for each component: content, organization, etc. The result was equally disastrous. I realized that I had imposed a difficult job with which my students could not cope. Since then, I limited the objectives for each of the first few sessions. For example, the first activity may involve simply asking writers to

read their papers and asking the peers to tell whether they understood the message. The second session would involve identifying the main points and determining whether each has been adequately discussed. Where the peer could not identify the main point, the writer is asked to point this out. In sessions where the focus is on grammar and mechanical errors, the objective may be to focus on one or two features only. As students move on, sessions are geared toward achieving multiples objectives in which case papers may be brought home and studied and then brought to class for group discussion.

The Use of English

· I used to require students to use English when discussing their papers. I explained to them that this was an opportunity for them to practice English. What usually happened was that most students simply read their written comments and if any discussion followed at all, these discussions were usually brief. Later, when I told them that they could use the vernacular, the discussions became longer and spontaneous. In future classes, I changed the rule: "You may discuss in the vernacular, but should someone speak in English, do not do anything to discourage that student from speaking in English." Sometimes dropping one objective is necessary to make possible the achievement of other objectives. Our students have very little practice in spontaneous unplanned speech in English. Requiring them to use English in peer feedback may be unrealistic since they still have to cope with their insecurities, with adjusting to their classmates and with the cognitive demands of studying and evaluating their peers' compositions.

Use of Student Compositions as Material for Practice

For purposes of practice, there are times I reproduce compositions from other classes (at students' expense) or from the class itself and the whole class evaluate these papers by looking into the content and organization first and then the grammar and mechanics. Then we formulate comments and suggestions, and evaluate whether they are clear and polite. Although we consider the expressions "You might do this" or "You could do this", such direct statements as "The introduction is too long, shorten it" or "State your main idea first before discussion it" are considered polite. When students understand the context in which peer feedback is being done, students seem not to be so concerned with how politely suggestions are made. What seems to be more important is that these suggestions

are relevant and will help them improve their papers.

But I must stress the importance of asking students' permission when their papers are used as materials for analysis. As I pointed out earlier, the composition in a way is a disclosure of the self and if we use it indiscriminately, we may be putting ourselves in an embarrassing situation. Here I must mention the experience of one of my masteral students. In her desire to use an authentic material to do a remedial lesson in grammar, she culled sentences from the composition of one of her students. The student recognized his sentences, accused the teacher of being unethical and threatened to sue her for moral damages. This incident shows the need for the teacher to be extra-sensitive to the culture-based variables in learning. But a general rule should be to ask students' permission first before using their papers as teaching material.

Teacher Feedback

Teacher's oral feedback in the form of suggestions and encouragement is important throughout the peer feedback sessions. But it does not mean that the teacher is free from making written comments. Thus, when I go over students' journals, I do make written comments, responding to what students have discovered in their learning and to the problems they have identified. Sometimes, I go over some students' written comments and inspect revised drafts to commend suggestions that have been effectively implemented and to question why a good suggestion has not been implemented. In this way, I try to make students feel that I am interested in what they do and concerned with whether they were doing their jobs well. While learning to learn on their own, many of our students still look up to teacher's authority to seek confirmation on what they do.

Insights: Teacher Roles and the Learning Process

Considering all the efforts that I have exerted to try to make peer feedback work in my classes, I cannot claim that I have all the answers to what makes it work. For one thing, our students are with us only within a semester. After a semester working with students, I still have the feeling that some students never seem to learn at all. But that is just a feeling for I refuse to be pessimistic and continue to cling to the idea that "teaching requires faith" - faith in the capability of my students to learn and faith that they are learning even if they do not show that they are.

In the meantime, I know I am learning.

As I continue to use peer feedback in my writing classes and reflect on my experiences, my understanding of the multiple roles of the teacher has somehow deepened. As motivator and counsellor, I have to constantly exert effort in helping them deal with their socio-affective problems, particularly those that deal with fear and anxiety, as I do the same with my own. I have to constantly remind them of the value of peer feedback and what they can get from it and from reflecting on their learning experiences, as I do the same with my teaching experiences. I have to learn to recognize what they think they have learned and to compliment them for it, no matter how little in terms of my expectations. As input provider, I have to provide appropriate information on what good writing means and to provide models for evaluating compositions and formulating comments and suggestions. As facilitator, I have to try to make a balance between being directive and non-directive and to exercise restraint and patience in the many cases where my expectations are not met. For indeed, despite our best intentions and efforts sometimes, our desired objectives are sometimes not achieve. I also have to learn to maintain my enthusiasm and interest in responding to querries raised by my students.

My experiences have also brought me insights about the learning process. In essence, learning requires a conversion of the self. But that conversion cannot be made through an appeal to the teacher's authority. It must be negotiated in the self. As Reid (1994:8) puts it, "Educational change occurs in individuals first. That is, change is a highly personal experience." Moreover, learning requires a personal commitment. In peer feedback, there are strong stumbling blocks to personal commitment and even when that commitment is made, it has to be affirmed again and again. As students engage in more peer activities, some strengthen their commitment, but others may backslide and getting up will oftentimes need the teacher's help. Learning also requires time and patience; the more complex the learning, the more time and patience. Engaging in peer feedback is a complex activity which requires multiple conversions: change in feelings, perceptions and attitudes; change in one's social and communication skills; change in one's cognitive skills like the ability to comprehend, evaluate and determine errors, synthesize, etc. It is unrealistic for a teacher to expect the same change from every student; some students will learn fast, others will take time, depended on a number of variables: students' feelings and perceptions, their classmates' support, the teacher's intervention efforts, etc.

When students have learned to control independently what they have learned, that is, apply effectively what they have learned in peer feedback to their

own writing, then we can say that the writing goal of peer feedback has been achieved. This means looking into what they write. Do student papers improve significantly as a result of peer feedback? I am still in the process of making a systematic study about this, but my observation is that a number do. Still I cannot be sure whether the major bulk of improvements can be attributed directly to peer help or to the writer's own efforts or to both. But if little happens in the improvements of compositions after peer feedback, I must refrain from blaming myself and attribute it to the nature of the learning process involved in writing. Learning to write or revise is a cognitively demanding task and takes time. I must say this again and again.

On the other hand, whatever about writing or whatever revision strategies students have learned during the semester will mostly be on the level of awareness yet. Using this awareness in making personal decisions so that it manifests in their writing will take more than a semester for most students. What I can hope for only is that if students have made a commitment to improve their writing within the semester, hopefully they will keep that commitment by implementing what they have learned in every future writing tasks. By doing this consistently, they will achieve fuller control of their knowledge through their own efforts and as a result of their sense of responsibility. Thus, is looking for results, I must be process-oriented rather than product-oriented in my view about learning.

Finally, I have come to a better understanding of myself, of what I can do and cannot do as a teacher. Like my students, the decisions I make with regard what and how I teach are defined by my perceptions, feelings, beliefs and my personality, but it is my responsibility to make sure these work in the interest of my students. I have to be comfortable with myself and with my limitations. When I feel that my students are not learning, I must keep faith. Given the complexity and sometimes illusiveness of learning, I must admit to my inability to see at times. Like my students, I, too, can learn, so I must continue to ask questions and not give up when answers are not readily available. Finally, I must realize that in the end, the final arbiter in deciding what can be learned or how to learn is not me but my students. The student's mind is sacred ground I cannot enter.

Conclusion

In the main, I have discussed in this paper the problems I encountered in the use of peer feedback, what I tried to do to help students cope with these

problems and the personal insights I have gained from my experiences. In re-counting my experiences, I want to affirm what many teachers may have already experienced. Once we think we know our principles and we have a full grasp of a teaching method, we sometimes think that everything will work out fine in our teaching until we realize that the soundness of these principles and teaching method has still to be verified in the real classroom situation within certain constraints brought in by both students and ourselves. We also realize that when a method works, it is because we have worked hard, using our own resources, and some-times after we have gone through a lot of trial and error. In our search for what works best in our classrooms, we engage in the "believing and doubting game" (Elbow, 1977). When our theories and principles seem not to work, we reject them and we fall back on our experiences while we constantly appeal to reflection and our own intuitions. Even then, when we think we have succeeded in one class, we realize that we could not do the same in another. The search for answers continues and that is because teaching, too, is an on-going learning process for us teachers.

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