The New Classroom: Themes and Content Changing Learner’s Attitude

What’s new in PT3’s “Technology in the Classroom” course at the University of Houston? Why did they change their course? Do the students like it? How has the bar been raised in the last two semesters since the big change?

In May of 2002, a team of four instructors from the PT3 Grant took it upon themselves to improve two of the technology courses for pre-service teachers. They wanted to bring a more constructivist learning theory into the practice of teaching this class. The four had been teachers of the classes in previous semesters. Everything had been going just fine, but they needed to have the students more involved in the assignments and take an active part in their instruction. The reason for this is that technology keeps changing – it never stops. Having to learn new technology has always frustrated students. However, if the students could be more involved in a purpose to their learning, and just have technology as something that helped them achieve their goals, then some of that frustration would be reduced.

The four instructors introduced the idea of a theme. The students were allowed to choose the topic for their work for the semester, primarily based upon a theme that was content area and grade level appropriate. The instructors felt that if a student chose their topic as something they were going to use in the future, then they would have a feeling of ownership of their work, and their activities would be more meaningful.

Not only did were better, more creative assignments produced, but the students were less frustrated and more engaged in what they did. They invested more of themselves into their work, spent more time on their products, and took pleasure in their projects because they picked a topic that they enjoyed.
Two semesters of students have gone through the new class. What the course instructors found is that the work is getting better and better. Students poured out so much effort in this new class that the instructors asked for permission to put all of the work on a cd to distribute to future classes. The students took great pride in this and were happy to share their work.

In the last semester the instructors showed the new students some examples of the previous semester’s work. They showcased the very best, to give the students an example of what to do and how high to reach. What they found is that the second semester students produced even better work than the first semester students. Some reasons for this might be that the first group did not have any way to compare their work, and had no example of what to do. It was a brand new class, and the instructors were not even sure exactly what they were expecting. Not only that, but it was the instructors’ first time to teach using the new style. They were new to the material and learning theory. But practice does makes perfect – not only for all students, but for all teachers as well.

In the future, the instructors hope to take the learning to an all-new level. Some content from higher level classes will be given to the lower level classes. The higher level class will be expected to master more integrated assignments. The instructors have higher expectations from the students in the upcoming classes. They are also expecting more independence and group collaboration. If such a large leap can be taken from one semester to the next, imagine what the future holds! Raising the bar, giving templates and showing real-life examples are just several things the instructors will do for this class. In the future, they can do even more.