BALANCED TEACHING: STRATEGICALLY MAXIMIZING EVERY MOMENT OF INSTRUCTION TO ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

The study of "pedagogical balance" in the classroom was derived from observing teachers using the same approach to teaching and learning day after day; and year after year students making mediocre progress. As an education leader and teacher evaluator I found myself become increasingly bored when I visited classrooms for teacher evaluations.

There are different types of teachers. I’ve summed them up in five categories; The brand new, out of university, do exactly what you tell them to teacher; the type of teacher whose primary concern is with getting through the curriculum; the type of teacher that is dynamic and energetic (all the students love them); the type of teacher that likes to personalize the craft of teaching and learning; and finally the veteran teacher that feels competent in their craft and gets frustrated with all the trends in education. With each type of teacher, you will get a different style of teaching. However, they all SHOULD have the same foundation in pedagogy.

Research proves that three of the aforementioned type of teachers contribute to the lack of desired results in student attendance, behavior and performance.

Balanced Teaching allows teachers the structure necessary in order to maximize their time and keep students interested and engaged. With a school-wide approach to balanced teaching, Principals, School Districts and other stakeholder will watch student performance data increase. They will watch student attendance rates increase and they will watch the overall ethos of the school or district transform in no time. Balanced teaching is directly related to effective classroom management, and student engagement. It can be used in teaching elementary school through post-secondary education. It eliminates poor behavior and encourages students to be actively engaged in their learning from the moment they walk into the classroom, until the moment they leave, allowing no time for negative behavior.

In Balanced Teaching there is a shared approach to learning where students and teachers are equally responsible in all aspects of students’ performance including behavior, attendance and most importantly academic growth.

The criteria of balanced teaching include five never changing principles that must be addressed during each teaching period. The two most important principles are how teachers start their lesson, the Do Now or Activator, and how they end their lesson, the Student Self-Assessment. In the Do Now, Students will understand clearly what they are responsible for and they will anticipate the new concept their teacher has to present. This activity must be done strategically in order to be effective.

The Culminating Activity or end of the lesson is equally important. Because of the balanced approach to teaching and the reduced teacher-talk time, teachers will be able to move around the room and assess learning. This allows the last part of the lesson to be a time for student self-assessment against established success criteria (given in the Do Now). This formative assessment approach goes far beyond a thumbs up, thumbs down or thumbs to the middle for comprehension. This activity, if done properly, will equip students with the necessary skills to evaluate their growth in learning any new skill now as students, and throughout their entire life.

The remaining three criteria is focused around the teacher introduction of the new concept, student collaboration to build confidence and finally student independent practice to perfect the new skill.

Keywords: Do Now, Balanced Teaching, Pedagogy, Student-Centered, Student Self-Assessment, Culminating Activity.
1 INTRODUCTION

The premise of this study is to determine the impact on learning when teachers have free-will in their approach to pedagogy? Should teachers be left to determine which best practice strategies to use when approaching teaching? Do all of them have the time or interest to research and keep up with “best practices?” Can some teachers do this, but not all?

This study began with 20 teachers who received their initial teacher observation during the first 9 weeks of school. A variety of teachers teaching core subjects such as Math, English, Arabic, Science and Social Studies were randomly selected and assessed. The teachers ranged from new teachers to veteran teachers; receiving their training from several different countries. The student grade levels ranged from grade 5 to grade 12.

Teachers were observed during different periods of the day beginning from period 1 to period 7. During the first 10 days, the goal was to get an idea of the quality of teaching and learning. Once the data was collected and analyzed, it was clear to see that there was no structure in place. The approach to teaching and learning was random. Each teacher approached “teaching” according to their own knowledge, experience or education. There were no school-wide expectations established. Veteran teachers did what they were accustomed to doing, and new teachers did what they thought they should do. There was a bit of continuity within departments, but it was most often directly connected to curriculum. Results depicted that only 15 percent of the students that entered the classes were prepared to engage in learning. Other classes showed students trickling in steadily. On some occasions, students continued to enter the classroom without an excused pass, even 15 minutes into the class session. In addition, in most classes, students sat and chatted amongst their friends while the teacher took attendance. In half of the classes the teachers still needed to write their objective and content standard on the board. Too much time was lost at the beginning of the lesson. If the lesson was observed after lunch time, it was quite difficult for teaches to get students settled so that teaching and learning could begin.

Unfortunately, once the classes did begin, 75% of the teachers used most of the time talking or lecturing. There was very little time for students to ask questions or practice the concepts. When it was time for the students to apply their knowledge, they had less than 10 minutes to “practice” or apply the skill. When group work was assigned, often it was one student who did the work for the entire group, while the other were spectators. When assessing the different teachers, it was evident that most of them had indeed planned a lesson. This of course suggest that they have good intentions. The question remains, did the administrators explain or provide professional development that depicted how a lesson should run? Although planned, no rigor was observed, no creativity was observed, and teacher spent most of the time talking “at” the students. It was clear to see that there was an immediate need for structure, higher expectations, 21st century skill development and overall balance.

In a research that was conducted on the impact of teacher training on student academic performance, it implied that the quality of learning depends on the skill, hard work and devotion of the educator. If a teacher lacks the desire to stay abreast with the speedy scientific and educational advances, then the teacher will become inefficient and ineffective.

Balanced Teaching is not about putting teachers in a box, in fact, it is just the opposite. Balanced Teaching allows teachers the structure necessary in order to maximize their time and keep students interested and engaged. With a school-wide approach to balanced teaching, Principals, School Districts and other stakeholder will watch student performance data increase, watch student attendance rate increase and watch the overall ethos of the school or district transform in no time. It is imperative for teachers to understand that they are 80% responsible for student attendance, behavior and certainly their academic growth. They need to further keep in mind that they are not the parent; yet they have a similar role. According to the Association of the Teachers of Social Studies of the City of New York (1967, p.353), “The teacher should be a guide not a dictator, an artist not a mechanic, a scholar and a philosopher not a collector and repeater of facts.” The above discussion revealed that training of teacher is key critical. Teachers will learn how to become this guide using the Balanced Teaching approach to teaching.

Balanced teaching is directly related to effective classroom management, and student engagement. It can be used in teaching elementary school through post-secondary education. The Balanced Teaching approach to pedagogy is an excellent practical teaching tools for administrators to use during their professional development sessions. When academic leaders use the Balanced Teaching approach, the result is fully engaged teachers. There is no time for grading papers or being distracted with mobile phones. The moment teachers enter session, they are in a controlled learning
environment. One where they are actively engaged with a Do Now or Activator activity engages the teacher upon entry and a culminating activity at the end allows teachers to reflect on the concept. In these teacher seminars, teachers will always leave the session with practical information that they can apply immediately. This is the exact concept academic leaders should stress when using balanced teaching.

Just as teachers are immediately hooked and engaged in the professional development seminars using balanced teaching, leaving no time for the traditional grading of papers or side conversations, students will also be engaged in learning as the principles of balanced teaching simply reflect effective classroom management practice. A research conducted by Shahzan, Sohaib, R. Gayathri and V. Vishnu Priya, argue that it takes effective classroom management principles with learners of all age levels, and across multiple industries, including the business industry, the public service industry and even in the medical industry. The research illustrates that modern classroom management practices to engage the learner and have the most impact on learning. The research continues to suggest that classrooms are followed like smart classes, giving the learner meaningful tasks an engaging them upon entry making learning more interesting so improved results are produced (2017).

Balanced Teaching is the remedy to eliminate poor behavior and harvest actively engaged students that are responsible for their learning from the moment they walk into the classroom, until they leave, allowing no time for negative behavior.

In Balanced Teaching there is a shared approach to learning where students and teachers are equally responsible in all aspects of students’ performance including behavior, attendance and most importantly academic growth. The shared approach is only effective if the teacher has properly established the partnership with the students in the beginning of the school year. Indirectly, David Barrs (2016) suggest that without a balanced approach to teaching, students may develop the perception that learning requires listening to the teacher in order to absorb knowledge. This is because of the respect towards a teacher’ authority. Unfortunately, if students have not become disengaged and lack interest, they inadvertently develop a passive approach to learning.

Principals may opt to use the Balanced Teaching principles to support the brand-new teacher, to return passion the burnt-out veteran teacher or bring clarity, vision and creativity to the getting through the curriculum type of teacher. In order to create a paradigm shift in the entire school or district, school leaders may opt to have a school wide movement toward Balanced Teaching establishing a solid foundation that all lessons can be built on even physical education classes.

The first of the five never changing principles that must be addressed during each teaching period will set the tone and start the balance process in the classroom. The activator activity immediately reduces the amount of time that teachers spend talking or lecturing. From the moment they enter the class, students are in control of their education. An effectively established, content-based Activator or Do Now, will release the teacher from standing in front of the class. If planned properly, it can easily give students a differentiated and appropriately rigorous task to prepare them for the lesson. They may be prompted with an organization task to allow immediate engagement in a hands-on activity, or they may be given a remediation task to prompt “thinking-mode” and prepare for an exam. Having specific roles for individual students during this time is invaluable; the more a student feels valued and realizes that their presence matters, they will respect the learning and the teacher. This will have an unbelievable impact on behavior as well as attendance. There are infinite strategies to creatively get students engaged, prepared, and responsible for learning while allowing time for the teacher to transition from the previous class, time for taking attendance or time for setting up the lesson. The activator is limited to no more than 4-5 minutes. In the range of Balanced Teaching, the activator takes not more than 9% of the allotted teaching time. When the teacher addresses the students, both teacher and students are ready to engage in teaching and learning, time is maximized, and the overall tone of the class is established. Gone are days where students meander into class at their leisure, as they will have grasped a clear understanding that they cannot afford to miss a minute of class, because they will immediately be behind.

The Culminating Activity or end of the lesson is equally important. Because of the balanced approach to teaching and the reduced teacher-talk time, teachers will be able to move around the room and assess learning while it is taking place. Balanced teaching allows time for teachers to really focus on the needs of all students during the lesson. If teachers are utilizing cognitive development tools such as CAT4 she can assess students, challenge students or support students according to their learning styles instead of the traditional method of paper and pen exams.
The last 9% of the lesson, very similar to the start of the lesson should be a time for students to be responsible for their progress and attainment in that session. This student self-assessment time is time for students to measure their growth and knowledge against an established set of success criterion given in the allotted teacher talk-time.

This very crucial activity exceeds the common ticket out the door to measure student comprehension. This activity, if done properly, is equipping students with the necessary skills to assess their growth in learning any new skill in life, now as students, and throughout their entire life.

The remaining three criteria is focused around the teacher introduction of the new concept, student collaboration to build confidence and finally student independent practice to perfect the new skill. All elements of Balanced teaching have a certain amount of time attached to it, providing balance in the teaching and learning. The “balance” being referred to is not equal amounts of time, rather it is a balanced approach to teaching that ensures that all the crucial components of a lesson are included. In fact, it is difficult to successfully teach an entire class without proper modeling, student collaboration, independent practice and assessment. Teachers will argue that they do all the above, including the teaches in this study. The results will reveal clearly that the typical approach used although with the best intentions, do not bring about the desire results.

The Balanced Teaching concept prevents teachers burn-out, increases student engagement and decreases student behavior infractions simply by providing the structure necessary for teachers to be creative; and laying the foundation for students to become active in and responsible for their learning.

After implementing the Balanced Teaching approach to instruction, schools have documented drastic improvement in student and teacher attendance. Students’ academic performance increased significantly, and the overall culture of the school improved.

Balanced teaching is not about control, it is about building structure for teachers to become more in control of their practice. It is the tool to enhance creative, innovative and dynamic educators, which is what is needed in this 21st century world. The transformation of teachers and positive impact on learning is immediate. As the shared approach to learning makes students feel that they are truly a part of their educational experience. They will be given choice, responsibilities and gently held accountable.

2 METHODOLOGY

In this research endeavor, during the initial 10-day period a sampling of 20 participants out of the 118 staff members were observed and evaluated. Each lesson was 45 minutes in length. Teachers were selected from different core subjects such as Math, English, Arabic, Science, Islamic Studies and Social Studies to ensure that each subject held significant weight towards students’ overall grade point average and graduation requirements. Using a rubric, I tracked the components of Balanced Teaching as well as monitored student’s behavior during the lesson.

See Table 1 For the lesson observation rubric which measures a range of different expectations in the classroom. The elements that are pertinent to this study are; Creating a Constructive Learning Environment, Setting the Stage for Learning, Modeling the Learning, Scaffolding the Learning, Assessing the Learning and Unifying the Learning. These elements, along with others are listed horizontally on the rubric. Listed vertically are ratings that depict the performance levels ranging from weak performance to outstanding performance. The performance levels were given a point system. The outstanding teacher would receive 5 points where as the weak teacher would receive 1 point. In each category, there is a description that details what actions should be observed by the teacher and the students. The weak descriptions have minimal expectations, while the outstanding description explains in detail what is optimal for that standard.

Once the teacher(s) are observed using the complete rubric, the scores are tallied placing teachers into the category of Novice, Capable, Skilled, Experienced or Master. Using this process teachers, subjects, grade levels and full phases can be ranked giving administrators a clear idea of the need for support or professional development on an individual, subject, or grade level basis. The data can also depict the need for school-wide intervention.
3 RESULTS

The results portrayed that only three teachers had the majority of the students in their class and ready to engage in learning immediately. Four teachers were ranked in the skilled category, having to still prepare the Activator or Do Now for the students and the remaining Thirteen teachers were rated Novice or Risk.

The same group of teachers were given a survey to determine their experience in the teaching profession. The range was broad, with two relatively new teachers, in the profession just two years, eight teachers teaching between three to nine years, and six true veterans, teaching 15 years or more. The data displayed below in “Fig.1” gives a clearer depiction that it is not the lack of teaching experience as only two participants were new to the profession, yet 80% of the participants ranked Novice or Risk. Thus, it was concluded that teachers either lacked the proper training or were simply suffering from burn-out and would benefit from a structured and balanced approach to teaching.

The survey also revealed that the teachers were educated all over the world, with 5 from the United States of America, 7 from Europe and 8 from Asia. This drastic awareness unfortunately points cause in two directions, the first and most important is their education institution and the second is the academic leader of the school. More than half of the teachers expressed not knowing what the expectations were. Teachers shared that for years they were not told what they were doing wrong, and never given feedback or training on exactly how to improve.

![Figure 1. Teacher’s Experience](image)

### Table 1. Excerpt from Teacher Observation Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Elements</th>
<th>Master (5)</th>
<th>Experienced (4)</th>
<th>Skilled (3)</th>
<th>Novice (2)</th>
<th>Risk (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creating a conducive learning environment (Students’ Entry)</td>
<td>All students (100%) arrive on time, are greeted by teacher, respond similarly, displaying highly productive relationships. Students get settled and begin Activator activity without prompting, depicting high expectations and effective routines and procedures Teacher takes silent attendance and finalizes prep. The Activator is directed related to the lesson or reviews previous learning.</td>
<td>Large majority of students (90%) arrive on time, are greeted by teacher, establishing positive relationships. Students get settled with minimal prompting by the teacher. Once students have started an appropriate Activator the teacher calls attendance and continues with prep.</td>
<td>Most (80%) students arrive on time and are greeted by the teacher. Students need prompting to get settled and the teacher is finalizing the Activator activity on the board. The activity requires lengthy explanation. Once settled, the teacher takes attendance and then begins to prep for the lesson.</td>
<td>75% of students arrive on time, others enter randomly, some announcing their excuses. No formal greeting or acknowledgement of students upon entry. Students show little respect for the class and teacher. Teacher continuously prompts students to sit, settle and get prepared for learning. Students take out paper or notebooks while teacher calls attendance. The Activator is vague or missing and students are dependent on the teacher. No clear routines and procedures are established.</td>
<td>Students are not punctual and are unfocused from start. Entry is disorderly. Teacher is not prepared; thus, students do not take the teacher seriously. Time is not valued. There are no routines and procedures established and there is clearly minimal planning.</td>
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4 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the data, professional development on the Balanced Teaching Methodology was given to all 118 staff members. In addition, surveys were given to help trainers get an understanding of just how much the teachers did understand about pedagogy. Many shared being taught trendy strategies in isolation, like how to improve reading or numeracy skills, or how to use a reading program but they had never been taught how to maximize their teaching time, share the responsibility of learning with the students, be creative from the start, or how to use a variety of assessments.

Their initial training was two days and consisted of obtaining a clear understanding of the five never changing elements. The training consisted of studying the theory behind the elements as well as seeing it in practice and practicing the elements themselves. Teachers were given time to become comfortable with the elements of Balanced Teaching. Peer observations were scheduled, and teachers learned how to observe each other carefully focusing on the Balanced Teaching elements and giving each other feedback. After two weeks of practice the Senior Leadership Team continued with the observations for semester one, including a re-evaluation of the initial 20 teachers. Of the 118 teachers, 88 scored Experienced. That is 74% of the teachers making a positive impact on teaching and learning gained from a 3-week strategic professional development of Balanced Teaching. The remaining 26% continued to receive sessions from the Senior Leadership Team. They were placed on Support Plans that identified Key Performance Indicators that had to be met by certain deadlines. These indicators were strategically selected forcing the teacher to focus on making the adjustments that would bring about the most impact in the classroom. After over 200 classroom visits from Senior Leaders, Subject Leads and Guest Evaluators ( Principals from other school), 90% of the staff were ranked skilled and above.

Surveys were given to teachers and they confessed not having clear expectations led them to do what they thought was best. Others admitted not giving “pedagogy” much thought at all. The shared that they didn’t realize how powerful the impact would be if they focused more on building a partnership with students rather than trying to fill their heads with the curriculum. The study increased collaboration amongst teachers. Teachers shared that they would hear great stories from students about activities happening in other classes; they said this prompted a desire to share best practices.

This particular year the parent teacher conferences at the end of the semester lasted much longer as there was a drastic increase in the number of parents that attended. Teachers shared that the most common topic with parents that evening was that their child was excited to go to school and they were very interested in sharing what they learned when they returned home. Parents thanked the teachers for increasing student confidence levels and giving them the desire to learn.

When students were surveyed, several students reported enjoying the “teachers” now which makes them enjoy the class more. The shared that they didn’t feel like they were always being told what to do, but rather they felt as if they were now required to express what they understood about the learning. They also felt they now had multiple opportunities to learn the concept because all around the room their classmates were in discussion about the learning. Students reported that working at home was much easier and they didn’t have to avoid their homework because of lack of understanding and failure.

The teachers realized that they still had a way to go to meet the new expectations of the principal who took responsibility of the academic performance levels of the students. This knowledge is crucial as it directly impacts that sustainability of the institution. It is impossible to sustain teacher efficacy with the dynamic trends in education and the demands that the work force put on the education industry. It is an ongoing process that goes on continuously throughout the educational life of a teacher. The International Journal of Business and Social Science Vol.2 No.4, 2011, sums this philosophy up clearly stating, “As one does not finish learning with graduation, likewise the teacher’s training goes on improving with the passage of time by gaining experience and study through-out the life span of a teacher.”

The principal revealed that the results of the study motivated him to re-think his mission, vision and goals for the school. He reported also sharing the Balanced Teaching concept with his feeder schools in order to ensure students were coming to his school or advancing further with the lifelong skills that balanced teaching brings.
REFERENCES


