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Case Studies on Teaching

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As they rode back to their school, the four Belmont teachers compared notes on the afternoon inservice.

"Professor Brooks really knew her stuff," Jayne Broderick remarked enthusiastically. "I'm not easily impressed by inservices, but there were several activities I observed today that I can integrate into my science teaching."

"What made it for me was the way she used those three teachers from Cranston to illustrate questioning techniques. That made it so much more realistic," commented Jessie Crane. "And the fact that one of them was a home economics teacher like me made it even better."

"I understand that Professor Brooks has been working with the teachers at Cranston for several months. Some kind of grant from the state department of education," Henry Carlyle added.

"I had forgotten about Sanders’s Classroom Questions and Bloom’s Taxonomy. They've been collecting dust in my bookcase at home since I finished my social studies methods class. I'd forgotten how useful they could be," Robert Benson said.

"We used them too in my English methods course at Tech," noted Mr. Carlyle.

"In an NSF summer institute a few years ago I remember having to prepare instructional goals and related questions, using the taxonomy," Mrs. Broderick said.

"I'm going to take another look at some of the materials I have at home on questioning techniques," Mr. Benson said as he steered the car into the Belmont parking lot.
“Thanks for driving today,” Mrs. Broderick said.
“Yes, we appreciate it,” Mrs. Crane agreed. “First-year teachers don’t always get stuck driving.”

The teachers laughed.

Robert Benson parked his car and let the other teachers out. As they departed, each offered the others wishes for an enjoyable weekend.

Benson pulled from the parking space, drove out of the lot, and headed toward his apartment a few miles away. As he drove, he thought about his seven weeks of teaching at Belmont. He recalled how surprised he had been, when he interviewed for the job, that seven native languages are spoken by Belmont students. Having grown up in a small, rural town and having had attended a school enrolling 656 students in grades seven through twelve, he had been awed by the 2,227 students at Belmont and the massive, block-long brick complex that housed them. He had been shocked by plainclothes security guards in the school. Having come from nearly an all-white community, he had viewed teaching in a school composed of 62 percent black, 26 percent Hispanic, 7 percent Asian, 4 percent white, and 1 percent Native American students with both excitement and fear. In a short time, however, he had become comfortable working in a multiethnic school in an urban community. He felt there were so many cultural advantages to teaching in such a setting.

Four of his five teaching assignments had gone well. He felt fortunate to have three preparations—two in different periods of American history and one in geography. Although he considered his classes to be large from his own school experience, having between thirty and thirty-five students is the norm in basic subjects at Belmont.

The geography class presents the most difficulty, even though Benson feels he can communicate effectively with the thirty-one students. The student composition of the class reflects that of the school. There are eighteen black, seven Hispanic, four Asian, and two white students in the class. The class is an elective at Belmont as a part of social studies requirements. The range of abilities in the class is wide. A fourth of the students are B+ to A students in all course work. More than half are C students. The remainder are D students. Generally, the students are well behaved.

Finding instructional resources is no problem. Benson has been able to find a varied selection of films, filmstrips, slides, and other materials concerning climate, imports and exports, transportation systems, social, economic, and political conditions of the countries being studied. “The students are attentive. I just can’t get them to think,” he mumbled aloud. “Perhaps attending the conference was a good omen,” he thought as he pulled into the parking lot next to the apartment complex where he lived. “Maybe I should spend more time on questioning and less time on lecturing and using audiovisuals.”

He got out of his car, locked the door, and walked to apartment 3B. He
inserted the key in the door lock, grabbed three letters from his mailbox, opened the door, and entered his apartment. He nudged the door shut with his foot while glancing at the mail. "Just more bills," he grumbled, as he tossed the letters on top of the desk. He unzipped his jacket, took it off, and threw it on the couch. He undid his tie as he walked to the kitchen. As he opened the refrigerator door with one hand, he tossed his tie onto the kitchen table. He pulled out a diet soda, snapped open the top, and sipped from the can. As he continued drinking, he walked back into the living room to a bookcase.

"I know they're here somewhere," he thought. Spying a tattered paperback copy of Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* near the top of the shelf, he pulled it out.

"If I were organized, I'd find Sanders's book close by," he mused.

"Ah, here," he said aloud, as he notice the book on the bottom shelf between *Yeager* and *Collected Short Stories of Mark Twain*.

He walked to his desk, put his drink down, and began leafing through Sanders's *Classroom Questions: What Kinds?* An excerpt from page 7 caught his eye.

The taxonomy of questions helps to clarify "learning by doing" by demonstrating that a child can be sitting quietly at a desk and yet be vigorously engaged in any one of a number of kinds of mental activities.

"Just the opposite of my geography class," he thought. "They sit quietly at their desks but aren't really engaged mentally."

He took a sharp pencil and legal-sized yellow pad from the desk drawer and took notes. In short order he opened Bloom's text. He skimmed over introductory remarks, a discussion of purposes for developing the taxonomy, to the appendix. "Here it is," he remarked. He copied the levels of the taxonomy on a second sheet of paper.

He closed Bloom's book and reopened the Sanders text, went back to the first sheet of paper, and continued writing.

During the weekend, Benson reworked his lesson plan for his fifth-period geography class. He reviewed notes on a twenty-minute UNESCO film on the economic system of Mexico. Then he drew a grid of the taxonomy with each level noted down the left-hand margin of the paper. As he went back over his notes, he wrote questions for each level of the taxonomy. On Monday morning, after getting dressed and eating breakfast, he reworked the questions for a last time, realizing there would not be time during the day to do more planning for the class.

Thirty minutes before the first bell, Benson packed his materials, left the apartment, and drove to Belmont. Up to the fifth period the day went smoothly. Students in each of his classes had been attentive. The level of
student participation was higher than usual—particularly for a Monday. He anticipated the geography class with confidence and enthusiasm. He had spent several hours preparing the questions and was excited about trying out his sequenced approach to questioning.

The fifth-period bell rang, and the students took their seats. Benson looked over the names in his grade book and glanced around the room. All the students were present.

For the first five minutes of the class he reviewed Friday’s lesson, which had covered the political system in Mexico. After summarizing major points of the political system, Benson set the stage for the class’s activity.

“For the remainder of the period,” he continued, “we will explore the economic system of Mexico. To introduce the topic I have printed five key terms on the chalkboard. Please put these in your notes.

“As you view the short film I will show in a minute,” he continued, “each of these terms will be defined and discussed. Please define the terms in your own words in your notes. Some of the terms you should recognize—we’ve used them before.”


“Mona, please turn off the lights,” Benson said as he motioned to a student to ready the room for the film.

After the film, he turned off the projector and flipped on the lights.

“Take the next couple of minutes to finish your notes while I rewind the film and put it in its cannister,” Benson instructed the class.

Three minutes later, armed with questions he had prepared over the weekend, Benson began the discussion.

“You will recall that when we studied other countries, we talked about the fact that a country’s currency serves as the foundation for its economic system. What is a currency?”

None of the students responded. He waited. After a half-minute of silence, he said impatiently:

“Come on, we’ve covered this in three other South American countries in the past two weeks. What is a currency?”

Meekly, one of the students offered a response.

“That’s a good start,” Benson replied reassuringly. “Who can build on what Lois has said?”

For the next thirty minutes Benson struggled to get students to respond. He stumbled through the grid of questions, noticing that students seemed reluctant to offer answers and had trouble moving up the taxonomy to higher-order questions. Out of frustration he ended the discussion early. “We’ll continue this tomorrow. Until the end of the period I want you to read pages 123 to 130, your assignment for tomorrow,” Benson concluded.

He walked to his desk, sat down, and retraced his steps through the questioning process. He reviewed his list of questions. “What did I do wrong,” he wondered.
After class, Benson went to the teachers' lounge—a place he often went to plan, grade papers, or discuss teaching strategies with Dolores Whitney, a forty-three-year-old social studies teacher he considered his mentor. He had met Dolores at a state social studies conference while he was student-teaching a year earlier. She was already in the lounge, putting grades in her grade book.

As Benson entered, Dolores greeted him. “Hello, Bob. How are you?”
“Not so good,” Benson responded glumly.
“It shows,” Dolores said. “A bad class?”
“I’m not sure what the trouble is. But, yes, the geography class last period was difficult. Especially after all the work I did this weekend to prepare.”
“Tell me about it,” Dolores remarked.
Benson related his excitement about the Friday inservice, explained the preparation he had made for the class, and reviewed what had happened.
Benson appreciated the fact that Mrs. Whitney was a patient listener. He had come to respect her for her unwillingness to give immediate advice and for her insistence that he think of alternative solutions for instructional problems he faced. Accordingly, he was not surprised when she asked:
“What are you going to do?”

**THE CHALLENGE:** What can Benson do to make the use of higher-order questions a more constructive, successful activity?

**KEY ISSUES FOR STUDY:**

1. Assume Benson’s role. From the information provided, what reasons might you give for the lack of success of the introduction of higher-order questions in the geography class?
2. What additional information would be useful in trying to identify reasons for his lack of success?
3. What other resources might you consult to secure a better understanding of what might have gone wrong?
4. What actions would you plan for Tuesday in geography class to continue the use of higher-order questions?
5. For each action you recommend in item 4, what theory can you offer in support?
6. What information in this case is not relevant to making changes for the effective use of higher-order questioning techniques?

**SUGGESTED READINGS**