Teaching Observation Report

Context

- **Instructor**: Bennett Slibeck
- **Department**: CIRTL
- **Date of Teaching Observation**: Friday, March 1st, 2024
- **Course Title and Number:** CIRTL Wowza! Discussion Series
- **Attendance:** 16
- **Classroom Location:** Zoom
- **Teaching Consultant**: John Staunton

The observed session is part of the CIRTL Wowza! Discussion Series aimed to integrate evidence-based insights into participants' teaching. One of the big goals of this series is to bring up more provocative ideas and how we think about these ideas. In this particular part of the discussion series, the participants aimed to be able to:

- Describe principles for using assessment as learning and not using it as assessments of learning
- Identify and implement one new principle into their own classroom
- Describe how their assessment strategies reflect their goals

In service of these learning objectives, Bennett aimed to have participants focus on discussing implementation together after encountering the same background information based on a CTL Dead Ideas Podcast. Bennett also planned on using breakout rooms for two small group discussions.

Pre-observation meeting summary

In our pre-observation meeting on Tuesday February 27th, Bennett articulated an interest in feedback about the following:

- Whether or not he is monologuing too long or if he is being direct enough and facilitating discussion
- Setting participants up for and invigorating discussion
- Yielding breakout groups that had significant student interest and engagement

At the start of the session, he planned to announce to the room that he was being observed and that it was meant for his pedagogical development.

Observation comments

Observation 1 — Bennett's use of breakout rooms effectively generated discussion among participants.

Evidence of effective practice

- The first question that participants were asked to address was "why assess?" Bennett shared a brief list of responses that demonstrated what assessments should be and, in the breakout room I observed, students identified with a lot of the items on that list.
- Bennett asked for responses from groups after returning from the breakout room. This structure provided him a way to check participants' progress towards learning objectives. In our meeting, we discussed that it is sometimes valuable to not only gauge whether people are able to foreshadow where you are going next, but to also gauge the level of depth in people's responses. For this purpose, chat communication on Zoom may not be sufficient and working in structured discussion within the big group could be vital.
- The first breakout room I observed had a lot of interesting and in-depth discussion. This included people who were even walking to work while tuning into the meeting, indicating that Bennett's planned use of break-outs to give people a less high-stakes place to participate worked in practice as it is unlikely for people to speak up in a big group setting if there is external noise on their end.

Suggestions for future practice

In our debrief meeting, we discussed various ways to incorporate big-group participation in addition to breakout-room participation. This provides another way to demonstrate not only whether or not people are on track but whether people are digesting the material and generating their own new/different responses. Some strategies we discussed include:

- Waiting to hear feedback from at least some of the groups. It may be helpful to give each group a specific thing they would be prepared to share with the big group once the breakout rooms ended. This way, they feel prepared to contribute something.
- Poll-everywhere has two features that might have helped out. The first feature is a word cloud that highlights common threads among participants. The second feature allows participants to input short responses and have them appear on the screen anonymously. The facilitator can then select a few responses they felt were particularly enlightening and ask whether any of those people would like to further elaborate.

We discussed how these strategies could potentially save time as it cuts away from needing to explain anything on future slides that was already covered by the participants.

Observation 2 — Participants had a strong background for participating in discussion, due in part to Bennett's concise and clear stage-setting at the start.

Evidence of effective practice

- Bennett began by setting a number of guidelines both for discussion as well as going over important aspects of assessment. It was clear that he understood his audience as many people who were joining may not have had a chance to listen to all or even some of the podcast as it constitutes extra work. He therefore decided to work under the assumption that people had not listened to it, even though having listened to the podcast was still helpful in providing additional context and real-world examples of different assessment structures.
- In our post-observation debrief, Bennett explained that there were three reasons why the podcast felt relevant. First, it questions base assumptions we may have from previous experience. Second, it provides a real-world example of a different assessment structure and lastly, it clearly explains the reason why this is important to think about. Bennett was able to stay in line with the learning objectives by planning the activities around these three aspects of the podcast, all while relying on information delivered within the seminar. This means that both types of students – students who had and had not listened to the podcast prior were able to get something out of the discussion.
- In both of the breakout rooms I observed, participants were able to engage with all the questions and did not appear to be confused. This demonstrates that they both had time to actually engage in the discussion as well as had the necessary background to do so, demonstrating that the introduction section was neither too much of a monologue (as was indicated to be a concern in the pre-observation meeting) nor was it insufficient to set the stage for an invigorating discussion.

Suggestions for future practice

In our debrief meeting, we highlighted ways to also develop the third reason behind using this podcast – the why. Some strategies we discussed include:

- Make the “why assess” bullet point slide into a warm-up activity. It may help using either a poll-everywhere or a google doc to collect people’s responses, but it is also likely ok just to give people that time at the start while people are coming in to prepare to process the question and be prepared to contribute to the larger group once needed.
- Assuming there is enough time, run the pre-planned structured reflection. Simply due to the fact that, in this session, it was hard to know exactly when things were going to begin, there was difficulty making sure there was enough time for a full reflection at the end, so Bennett left the participants with “why” as a question to go home with. Had there been more time, it would have been nice to hear contributions from the larger group.

We noted that many of these strategies will only work depending on the context of the session. There were over 70 people who had signed up for this discussion, but ultimately only 16 people attended. It can be very difficult to adapt to such wildly different situations and so these suggestions can be helpful as a toolbox where different strategies work better for different situations/contexts.

Observation 3 — Bennett creates a very comfortable space for participants.

Evidence of effective practice

- Many people were able to contribute both in the chat and within their own groups.
- In our post-observation debrief, Bennett demonstrated that he was fully aware that he did not have the luxury of being with the same group for a semester as he would a class, so it is difficult to build rapport with students and understand what works well for them and what doesn't. He made a conscious effort to make sure no one was singled out by creating activities that did not put people on the spot as well as structure the content so it assumed minimal background entering in.

Suggestions for future practice

In our debrief meeting, we discussed how there can sometimes be a conflict between making sure people have a comfortable space to contribute while also still getting participation within the larger group. We discussed how "setting the stage" is a perfectly good approach where warm-up activities and breakout rooms give people the chance to think through their thoughts and if there are people who'd like to chime in, then leaving some silence for people to unmute and speak is still good.