

Teacher case study example

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Dead Poets Society, a movie featuring Robin Williams as an innovative English teacher Mr. Keating at an exclusive boys' school, is an insightful tale of modern teaching. Throughout the movie, both young and experienced teachers can notice many details of Mr. Keating's teaching style that can influence their perception of teaching in the 21st century.

Inspirational classes delivered by the main character are a breakthrough in the life of his students, changing their outlook and understanding of life forever. Mr. Keating's teaching stands for new values and attitudes, innovation in teaching methods, and specific ways of knowledge construction.

Shift from Content Focus to a Real-World Approach

Traditional teaching was always characterized by the emphasis on the content specified in the curriculum guide. The teacher was supposed to 'cover' certain topics, and it was appreciated if he or she could do so efficiently and quickly (Jukes, McKain, 2005, p.

3). Knowledge was rammed into children's heads regardless of whether the process truly inspired them. The application of knowledge learned to the real world was either non-existent or treated as a useful appendage to the process of 'covering' the material. It is this traditional model that students are accustomed to at the beginning of Dead Poets Society, which makes it relatively easy for Williams' character to surprise them from the start. His understanding of poetry is not that of some old, classical stuff approved and certified by critics over the centuries and shoved away into dusty textbooks.

In *Dead Poets Society*, poetry emerges as a way to understand the world. Mr. Keating does not start from the first poet in the curriculum guide; instead, he opts for using poetry to illustrate an idea, namely that of *carpe diem* (seize the day). Although this notion surfaces rather often in poetry and prose, boys seem oblivious to it, bogged down in the meticulous study of all sorts of poets in their textbooks and ranking their poems on the suggested scale. Mr. Keating takes their attention off memorization and guided exploration to genuine feeling for poetry and its relation to the real world and real people.

Students learn how they can apply knowledge embedded in poetry to their lives. This application cannot match the development of practical skills found in math and science; however, Mr. Keating succeeds in making the highly abstract world of poetry close and understandable to students in his classroom. His endeavor to make knowledge practical is also evident in the departure from the usual order of topics covered as he is not afraid to ‘waste’ the lesson on changing students’ mentality rather than peppering them with new facts. At the start of the lesson, Mr.

Keating tells his students to call him using the title of a Walt Whitman poem “O Captain! My Captain!” In doing so, he gives the classical poetry a new meaning. Rare a student will not be interested to read the poem after such an encouragement if he or she has not yet done so. In this way, in Mr. Keating’s teaching English literature is transformed from an enclosed knowledge system ‘in itself’ into a functional knowledge paradigm that is actively drawn upon to speak about things in everyday life. Today, this type of information processing becomes more important than ever, allowing students to interpret and apply things learned in the classroom in their way.

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The Role of the Teacher

Mr.

Keating has an understanding of his role as a teacher that is fundamentally different from the conservative teaching model prevalent in the school. He does not emerge as a dictator in the classroom; nor as a manager who is obsessed with managing routine tasks and has no time or inclination for leadership. Instead, he is the leader who fascinates students with his speeches on poetry. Keating does not only engage students; he leads them to discover poem for themselves, conveying to them the meaning of artistic work. His role is also to use his authority that is derived as much from superior knowledge as from position to help students challenge their assumptions and expertise they accumulated through earlier learning.

The moment when students stand on their desks is one of the most important in the whole movie, enabling the viewer to see the main thrust of Keating's teaching philosophy – his desire to teach new, unexpected ideas and influence viewpoints rather than just disseminate information. In challenging old assumptions, Keating is not afraid to violate parental expectations; he is engrossed in the process of transforming his students and seems oblivious to the desires of other stakeholders such as parents and school administration, which will cost him his job in the end. The movie makes one think about possible ways to reconcile innovative teaching models with the value systems of older colleagues to avoid the type of conflict that eventually deprives students of their brilliant English teacher.

The Role of Students

The student body, immediately upon arrival of Mr. Keating in the classroom, is a quiet, composed and well-protected lot that sees their presence in the school as something they must do to overcome the obstacle – get a good grade for graduation. The movie presents a picture of the awakening of these young minds as they complete liberation from old, trite routines.

The process of tearing out the introduction that instructs them how to grade a work of art delights them exactly because the protest against this routine procedure has long been brewing. For some, the idea of skipping that part never crosses their mind because the authority had not sanctioned it; with the coming of Mr. Keating, it becomes acceptable, and this is a new norm that is gladly followed. The difficulty in relinquishing old models of learning at the psychological level is demonstrated by the student who wonders after this first impressive class if they are going to be tested on this. Being placed in the conventional models, these students had to fight through thickets of facts and information; however, regarding the procedure, they always knew what was coming to them. Keating's emotional and spontaneous style was a revelation to many of them, and to many, it was surely a disturbing revelation.

Keating believes that “ the purpose of education was to learn to think for yourself” (Dead Poets Society). Students in his class had, therefore, to discover for themselves this novel activity – thinking, independently processing information in ways not prescribed in textbooks, challenging old assumptions and creating new knowledge. His approach is novel at Welton Academy, and yet many of his students such as Neil Perry and Todd

Anderson catch on and take to the teacher who allows them to do independent thinking. It is this thinking and independent research into their teacher's background that leads boys to revive the secretive club named Dead Poets Society.

Knowledge Construction

In Mr.

Keating's teaching model, knowledge is constructed through dialogue rather than the monologue. Students are encouraged to be "daring" in the classroom (Dead Poets Society). The dialogue methodology is an important step in the development of teaching in the 21st century. Learning to conduct the dialogue with strangers that may come from a different culture and share different values in this age of globalization is an important asset in today's environment (Sharon 2001-2004). Students in Keating's classes are brought into contact with each other in ways that were most probably not possible in any other class where they were shoved into corners to check on their homework. Instead, they are learning to conduct the dialogue with the teacher and each other.

In these English classes, a large part of the knowledge comes from the student's resources, a fact that is both challenging and empowering. This trend is coming to dominate classrooms, as teachers begin to realize that they cannot act as the only authoritative sources of knowledge for their students. An interesting moment is when silent and shy Todd Anderson is forced to speak in the classroom with his eyes closed. The moment is so significant in Todd's inner evolution that it can be regarded as one in which

he breaks out of his “ quiet desperation” in which he had lived before, struggling with his parents’ expectations and getting the same present from them every year (Dead Poets Society). This moment is empowering since it challenges Todd’s abilities and finally leaves him content with his performance as he gets full approval from his teacher and admiration from the rest of the class.

Gratitude for this empowerment is what moves Todd to lead the little desk-standing rebellion when Mr. Keating leaves the school. Keating’s ideas of “ inheriting the earth,” as he tells Meeks, are close to Piaget’s concept of knowledge construction that emphasizes learning as a continuation of the civilization grounded in the previous history of humankind (Dead Poets Society; UNESCO, 1996). This anthropological approach to knowledge in Jean Piaget’s philosophy was complemented by the persuasion that “ educational activity should help the child to construct new knowledge” (UNESCO, 1996). These ideas are very close to the style of teaching that is followed by Mr, Keating.

He indeed does his best to connect students with general trends in their environment, linking them to the history of humankind demonstrated in poetry and literature. His emphasis on independent knowledge construction is also along the same lines. The knowledge that counts and is considered truly valuable is the one that comes from students’ minds as they internalize knowledge received from poetry and share their insights with classmates. As the changing teaching concept suggests, Keating seems to have little respect for ideas and information embodied in textbooks. With his passion

for poetry and its extensive knowledge, he can count on his information resources to answer his questions.

The episode with Todd Anderson demonstrates that Keating in his teaching seems determined to bring out the best in each of the students, showing them the power of their intellect. The knowledge that counts comes from both the teacher and students. Although the teacher remains the leader who orchestrates the process of knowledge construction, students' input is considered more than welcome – it becomes a necessary component of the whole process of learning. Speaking of marginalized or silenced knowledge, one can say that the knowledge of the textbook composed by a certain Mr. Pritchard is regarded as marginalized.

Students learn to discard his theories and inventions like grading poems on a scale. The teacher proposes a new model, which seems to be adopted by the class with enthusiasm, although at first, it scares some students.

Attitudes and Values

Mr. Keating's attitude toward students is one toward rational human being. He is not inclined like the principal to exclaim “ Freethinkers – at 17?” (Dead Poets Society). The desires and wants of students are legitimate, as is, for instance, Neil Perry's desire to do acting in the school play.

Mr. Keating proves to be the only adult person in whom Neil has the power to confide, unlike other teachers or his parents. It is possible that this attitude toward students as fully rational, mature human beings is partly responsible for Neil's suicide. Empowered at 17 to be a free thinker and defy his father's authority, Neil does not yet have the power to contradict his power. The

discrepancy between the thinking style developed in him by his teacher and his maturity generates the crisis that leads to such disastrous consequences. This sorrowful episode is a reminder to the 21st-century teacher that one needs to equip a student with tools to master the reality and adequately assess his or her potential before sending one out into the world to cope with challenges.

The attitude to students as toward equals is also manifested in Keating's casual style which he uses in addressing them. Thus, Keating does not hesitate to call Anderson a "mole" and tell him that his assignment probably "scares the hell out of" him (Dead Poets Society). He knows what emotions to appeal to when he tells boys that poetry is used to "woo women" (Dead Poets Society). To many, Keating's down-to-earth image that he strives to project in the classroom can be shocking as it departs from everything they have observed so far in their teachers. However, he persists with this attitude, trying to point out to students that he is very much like them.

In the same way, he speaks of dead poets as just some other boys who were driven by the same motives and desires as Keating's students. The values of Mr. Keating can be roughly defined as belief in the power of knowledge ("No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world"); appreciation of beauty; carpe diem, meaning living one's life to the fullest right here and now; individualism, and ability to look at things from different viewpoints all the time (Dead Poets Society). The latter quality, in particular, is an asset to the 21st-century teacher driven by the need to prepare students for independent decision-making. His appreciation of individualism is manifested in the call to trust one's feelings despite the enormous need

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for acceptance (Dead Poets Society). The values, in general, are not new; however, they take on increasing importance these days as diverse environments, from corporate offices to public offices, begin to take individual approach and personal development seriously.

What makes the movie and Robin Williams' character stand out is the talent with which he brings those values across and the conviction with which the teacher professes his beliefs. It brings one back again to the importance of techniques and methods in teaching: the same words said in a mild tone pronounced to students sitting quietly behind desks would have a different effect than in the case when students are challenged to climb their desks.

Conclusion

The case study of Mr. Keating's teaching in Dead Poets Society is highly relevant and inspirational to teachers striving to adapt their students and teaching methods to the needs of students in the 21st century. To be a teacher in Mr.

Keating's understanding is to teach students to produce new knowledge for themselves, generating it as a synthesis of information retrieved from primary sources and their knowledge. The movie vividly portrays the process of students' awakening as they learn to be free thinkers and start believing in their power. Teaching envisaging students as equal partners rather than subordinates or cogs in the machine is the call of this century. A teacher can never get tired of inspiring students to do something on their own, and this implies trusting their ability to do so despite the persisting pressure to do otherwise. The movie also makes one think about relationships with parents

and school administration, and the role of these stakeholders in the teaching process. Overall, it certainly inspires one to think more about the Carpe Diem philosophy – also compelling teachers to use every lesson to let their students make discoveries and create new truths.

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