



MOTIVATION

4

CASE STUDY

MEETING THEM *Pitton (2010)* WHERE THEY ARE

SETTING: High school history

FOCUS QUESTIONS: While reading this case, consider the following questions:

- How do you generate lessons that engage students?
- Do you consider yourself a student-centered teacher or a content-focused teacher?
- How do you go about getting students excited and motivated about your subject?

The first time I was observed by my college supervisor I taught a lesson I also chose to record. Although this was a requirement for my portfolio, I was eager to get a picture of myself in full teacher mode. After all, I had been teaching this class, a senior American history elective titled Conflicts that Shaped Our Society, for a week already. I had researched, developed, and was ready to implement what I thought was a very interesting lesson on the Red Baron. Reviewing the digital images later on, my level of inexperience was clear and so were the students' looks of boredom and disinterest!

By design, I intended my Red Baron lesson to be a chance for me to shine in front of everyone. I admit it—I felt a little cocky about teaching because I was an older student, returning to get my teaching license after a stint in the military. I had been in ROTC during

my undergrad career and was an officer during my service years. I was not one of those nervous twenty-two-year-olds who didn't even know how to stand up in front of the class with confidence.

My confidence was very high, and I expected to have this lesson generate positive feedback from my supervisor. However, the impact of several things dulled my shining moment, and these were easy to see on the monitor. First, I had purposefully filmed my third-hour class, which had been very lethargic during the first few weeks of the semester. I chose this class because I expected that everyone would get turned on and be very involved in the lesson. This was certainly not the case.

Although I had been very enthusiastic in presenting the material, when the camera panned the classroom, the bored looks, yawns, and limited number of note-takers made it obvious that my excitement did not transfer to my students. I was so involved in reading the text on my power point slides that I hadn't even noticed what the students were doing.

Second, when I tried to add some student engagement by asking questions and heard, "I dunno" in response to my queries, it was obvious by my tone and facial expression that I was frustrated and a bit irritated at the students' lack of participation. Perhaps as a result of this, I began to answer my own questions, barely waiting for anyone to get their hand up. I also called on my reliable students over and over again, which didn't do much to get other folks involved.

I was very surprised that this happened, because I loved my Red Baron lesson. I had read artifacts and primary documents, including excerpts from his journal, and had identified this fighter pilot's personal side. I had read these stories to the class, attempting to convey the intense tone of the writing by my vocal inflection. I had asked students to talk about the relationship between the Baron's reflections about the war and his bigger-than-life persona.

I thought this information about the struggles of a participant in an earlier war could be related to the traumas felt by Vietnam veterans later in the semester—or at least, that is what I had planned. After watching the looks of indifference on the faces of the students in my class as I went on and on about the Red Baron, and seeing

the lack of involvement or any motivation or interest on the part of most of my students, I began to reevaluate my skills.

I really liked to talk, and I knew I could speak clearly and powerfully, but maybe this was not enough. I began to think a bit more about the strategies we had discussed in my methods class. It had not felt very good to be struggling to get students to answer in class . . . my image of myself as this dynamic teacher was fading fast. Maybe I needed to do more than pontificate on the subject—maybe I needed to try something else.

Conversations with my cooperating teacher and my college supervisor made me face a problem I never thought I would encounter: a seeming inability for students to find meaningfulness in the material. My college supervisor asked, "Why is this information important to the lives of those students in your class? How can they relate this to their own experiences?"

I replied that the topic fit one of the standards that asked the students to know historical figures from both World Wars. I thought that hearing about someone who was not one of the big names in the war would intrigue them. I thought that because I enjoyed reading about this stuff, and because the Red Baron's name appeared on my cooperating teacher's upcoming test, it was important.

Considering that this concept could be tied together with later information—I was convinced that this would be a good lesson. My supervisor persisted, "But what do you know about these kids that leads you to believe this lesson is one that will work? How does this lesson connect to their lives?"

I answered, "I thought the kids would get into it. I never had history connected to my life—I just learned it because it was presented by the teacher." History had always been something I really loved, and while I had often studied something because it was required, or because something was sure to be on the test, I also found the interactions and personalities of the past interesting.

Yet somehow it all seemed meaningless to these kids. I was a bit irked that something I felt so strongly about, and which I had spent so much time and energy putting together, was such a bomb in the classroom.

As I sat and thought about my lesson, I had to acknowledge that one of the reasons I had been excited about the lesson was because my father had been in the Air Force, and I loved planes. I thought that my lesson would personalize the experiences of the war for my students, but perhaps those connections were all in my mind. Why would they be excited about something that seemed so far removed from their lives?

Had I communicated to them the reason that I found the journals of the Red Baron so interesting? What had I done to find out about the students' interests? How could I meet the students where they were in regards to their knowledge and interest in history? This was an elective class, so I had assumed that the students would be history buffs. One thing seemed certain, I needed to ask the students about their own knowledge and interest in a subject rather than assuming that they knew nothing about the information we were studying—or that they even cared about the topic.

After some prodding from my college supervisor, I acknowledged that I had to spend some time searching for ideas that would connect what we were studying with the students' lives. I also needed to take some time to find out a bit more about the class members as individuals. I had just been looking at them as a sea of faces and never considered who they were and what they cared about.

Because I had been turned on to history by my own background, my supervisor suggested that I have the students interview someone from their family who had been in the service to get their opinion about the military. Or, if they didn't know anyone who was a veteran, they could ask about their opinions related to war in general. They would then give a brief presentation in class about what they found.

I also decided that I needed to give the class reasons identifying why each lesson was important (beyond just knowing it for the test). This was where my objectives came into play—I planned to share them with the class at the start of each unit, and maybe even for each lesson. I also needed to acknowledge that what was inherently exciting to me might not be so thought provoking for the students. I realized that I had to generate a connection, or reason, for their

interest to avoid ending up frustrated and blaming the students for their lack of involvement.

I didn't like to admit it—but I knew that students might not really care about history and that I needed to create some interest by what I did to introduce the lesson or unit. I went back to the planning processes I had used in my methods class, something I had sort of skipped over during student teaching. I realized that I needed to identify in the objectives what it was that the students were expected to know and do after completing a unit—whether it was to identify names and dates or compare and contrast different periods or historical events.

The thing is, I had been so engrossed in developing this wonderful presentation for my lesson, focusing on giving the class the benefit of my expertise with lots of facts, that I forgot to consider some of the very basic things that I knew were important for the students: How were they involved in the lesson? And why should they care about this particular lesson?

The video had pointed out that my ability to lead a discussion needed some fine-tuning as well. I decided that rather than generate questions spontaneously (which I thought would lead to a more student-directed discussion), I would write out specific questions ahead of time.

Another look at the recording pointed out that I should give the students more time to think about their answers. I reread my methods text and acknowledged that I needed to figure out some structure or strategy to move me beyond a teacher-centered, direct instruction approach.

With these ideas in mind, I planned to put the students into small groups and have them generate answers to my prompts prior to our whole-class discussion. I hoped that this would give everyone some time to think about the questions and hear various viewpoints from their peers. And finally, I decided to use a seating chart to mark which students participated in our class discussions and keep track of this so that I could direct questions or elicit response from students who typically did not answer in class.

As I looked over the action plan that my supervisor and I had outlined, I wondered, "Would all of this work?" I was a bit uncomfortable

about giving up control of the classroom and using small group discussions. And I wondered if I would always be able to find realistic connections between the topics and the students. Still, I wanted to get the class involved in their own learning and see some interest, some spark, ignite in the students' eyes during my lessons.

Why go to all this trouble? I was committed to working on engaging the students because I did not want a repeat of the deadly dull Red Baron lesson. I was glad that I had ten more weeks left of my student teaching experience—because developing lessons that were interactive, engaging, and connected to the students' lives would certainly take some time!