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THE PRACTICE

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Accordion Class

What is Speed?

What do we mean exactly when we talk about speed, and how do we experience speed in the classroom environment? Why am I asking this? A recent classroom experience provides a first answer. I had just had an extended session with students from the hospitality sector. We spent considerable time working on technical aspects such as clear formulation in reporting incidents, which is key in their handling of guests. A fit-for-purpose task as the group works in an Amsterdam luxury hotel and they have roles varying from management to coordinating events. I asked them to indicate what they felt they would need to work on in the next session. The response was: more activities that would put them 'on the spot'.

The need for fast-action activities was not surprising in that we had worked on this in previous sessions. But it may seem more surprising given that we had just been addressing a quite different learning need, one which they had specifically requested. A simple answer would be that their needs vary, and when asked by the teacher it is then for students a case of 'we've done this, now let's do more of that'. But the idea that their response may be connected to the notion of speed is worth exploring. It would tell us more about how speed affects the dynamics of the classroom.

So again, what do we mean by speed? A basic definition of speed is 'swiftness or rate of performance'. This is itself a learning need which I constantly address, as our students are performing in a challenging work environment

where agility of response is becoming essential. But just as interesting is the more neutral, technical definition of speed as being the *pace* at which something is performed. Our students now live in a 'faster is better' world, so this is a factor that we need to consider as educators. However, the very fact that there are also different kinds of speed is relevant when it comes to learning.

Different Speeds

We are therefore talking about learning activities which are performed at different speeds. To get a better idea of what is at stake and how speed affects the dynamic of any classroom session, we need to have a closer look. I have discussed elsewhere* a series of activities which address the idea of speed. They can be roughly put into three categories: fast, slow and fast-slow. Each creates its own dynamic and has different didactical considerations.

An example of the first category is using discussion formats with an ultra-short timeframe. I call this format Quick 'n Dirty as students have only 1-2 minutes to prepare and a maximum of 5 minutes for discussion. The emphasis here is more on students engaging in discussion than on using accurate language. Rules are simple: peer correction is not stimulated as this is about participating and listening. The time constraint acts as a structuring principle in that it is easier for students to remain focused. The feedback I give here is mostly delayed or post-activity. I avoid using immediate feedback here as this may hamper ease of student production, which is what the activity is about. I always indicate the framework of the activity to students so that its didactical grounding is clear, but I also say why they are receiving other forms of feedback. If you don't explicitly adopt a protocol, you may be making the activity less effective as students feel that there is a lack of direction.

An example of the second category is what I call Slow 'n Steady. Group discussion is deliberately slowed down through cued intervention, which gives the students the opportunity to reflect and reformulate. The didactical effect is quite different from those of the first category: the activity foregrounds accuracy of language. Setting clear parameters is key, given the focused nature of the activity. Interventions can also be orchestrated by having the students punctuate the discussion, paraphrasing or reformulating what other participants have said. This slower

* References available on request.

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and more reflective treatment of their interpersonal language can be emphasised by moving to another medium during interventions. A good example of this is when a visual medium is used. Students 'display' their interventions on tablets, smartphones or mini-whiteboards and this triggers a more interactive response. As the group dynamic becomes more apparent, students often experience that the learning activity has immediacy as well as being interpersonal.

The final category is more developed than the first two. The activities are now two-part: not fast or slow but fast-slow. The first part which is about language generation requires more creativity and fluency: students are invited to generate words or word sequences in a relevant field. This is done for example through word-cube games or word association, thereby creating the working material that they will develop in the second, slower part. One example is where I model a statement on a topic they are familiar with: I write up a statement on a laptop; the students then in turn write their own variation on the same laptop. This theme-and-variations approach engages their fluency skills: they need to work fast and improvise. Immediately after this, we initiate the second, slower part when students are asked to reflect and, if necessary, reformulate. Here students are drawn into the learning by having to actively use their reflective capabilities in striving for accuracy.

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What we see in the third category is a change in pace from fast (production) through medium (reformulation and combination) to slow (reflection and analysis). So, we are integrating different speeds within the one activity and each has its own relevance. We may find as teachers that, as we become more experienced, we are intuitively doing something similar. What is, however, different here is the foregrounding, the explicit showing to students that activities have their own

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speed and dynamic.

Jack C. Richards once compared the lesson plan to a map. You know where you are heading and your map is an indication of how to get there. But there are many side roads and how we are getting there may turn out to be quite different from what we first imagined. That third category has the seed of what he is talking about. Its fast-slow can be varied and developed to cover a whole classroom session. We need to adopt more flexible and modular approaches in designing lessons, ones which reveal the interconnections. I would suggest that modular strategies in lesson design and the idea of interconnectedness are relevant when we engage our students in the classroom.

The lesson plan I now have in mind for my next session with the hospitality students has a fast-slow-fast-slow structure. The resemblance to a musical composition

comes to mind. We could extrapolate that and see our classroom role, and the interplay with the students, as being similar to that of the accordionist who pulls and presses his 'squeeze box' as he dictates the change in pace of tango, polka, reel, or waltz in a call-and-response with his audience. So, this would be an Accordion Class, not a real one but one for learning.

And I hear you say: what about the specifics of how the different modular activities interconnect? I have touched on just some of the didactical considerations which would need to be addressed. But you may also see this as a call to arms. Let's introduce more (technical) play into how we design our classroom work. That would be a way forward in striving to make our classroom sessions breathe, for us and our students.