Brain-Mind Learning Principles in the Yearbook Classroom

For the past week I have been asked countless times, “How are the English teachers doing?” or “Are you intimidated?” To tell you the truth, I never thought of entering the PIE program in that way. In fact, I was a little surprised that there weren’t other non-art teachers in the program. I enrolled in the class because I wanted to learn more about Photo Shop. I certainly did learn more about Photo Shop, but I also spent some time thinking about Renate Caine’s Brain-Mind theories presented and just how applicable they are to every area of study, especially as I found myself in the “enhanced by challenge” stage for the week.

While my chief areas of instruction are American Literature and AP Literature & Composition, I have also been teaching a course called Yearbook Production where I have to teach students basic uses of In Design and Photo Shop to submit pages to our publisher. For the most part, I show the students the basics and then they experiment with the programs to put together the yearbook. While teaching the course is rewarding because the students produce a state-awarded book, it is much more rewarding because of what I witness with the staff as they produce the book. Sure, talking about literature and writing is interesting, but the process of producing the book best prepares students for what they will encounter when they leave the shelter of a school environment. There are no life textbooks. In the production course, students
learn to work with others, to delegate responsibilities, to ask for help, to lead other students, to
design for publishing, to write with a journalist’s voice, and so much more. They are responsible
for producing an actual product and dealing with the public, skills that aren’t always found in the
usual English classroom. In turn, the course takes on a personality that doesn’t resemble that of
a traditional English classroom. Students in the course range from freshmen to seniors. They
have varying levels of experience and talent. They work like they are employed by an
advertising agency: meeting with creative teams, writing teams, production teams, and
submitting timesheets. The brain-mind learning principles are most evident in this environment.

The Brain-Mind Is Social

There is no better environment for collaboration than a yearbook production room. We
have weekly roundtable meetings where students discuss what stories they’re working on.
Frequently, other students will provide information on potential sources or good photo
opportunities, but the real learning process seems to go on once the students take their materials
to the computers. An outsider entering the yearbook production room might see a row of
computers, a highly decorated wall, and bunch of ponytailed girls bopping to Taylor Swift or
Jason Mraz as they click away at their Macs. But that’s just an artificial glance. While they are
working, you’ll really see each student lean over to show another how to perform a task on the
design programs, offer a picture to complete a page, make a suggestion on a design, or simply
encourage another to keep at it. Age and experience seem to become irrelevant in this situation.
Take an upperclassmen in the group, Julie, as an example. One of the top GPA holders in the
school, she is one of the least artistic of the students. While Julie is used to taking on leadership
roles in traditional academic situations, she has learned to seek opinions of her yearbook peers on
design. Other students have been quick to show her the ways of Photo Shop’s magnetic lasso or
In Design’s persnickety text wrap tool. Frequently, I’ll hear students say, “I know Maddie knows how to do that” or “I saw Caroline do that to her page.” These situations allow for the students to learn from each other in much more effective way than if I handed them the Photo Shop Classroom in a Box textbook. Here, the learner and teacher go through a process that allows for a greater experience. Not only are students learning how to work together, they are imparting the knowledge to each other through guided practice, which them becomes independent practice. Similar to this situation, students often “discover” a design technique or a shortcut and share it with the rest of the class. This process is much more rewarding as the students take ownership of the technique and pride in instructing their peers.

*Complex learning is enhanced by challenge and inhibited by threat associated with helplessness*

Here’s the challenge each spring as we begin production of the following year’s book. We have over 240 blank pages to fill in a way that looks appealing, gets the information accurate, comes in at budget, and contains something new. As I remind the students also, “You wouldn’t pay $90 at Barnes & Noble for a book that’s ugly and has typos.” In addition to completing those tasks, the students work under the pressure of deadlines, which often fall around the same time as major holidays. The factors contribute to the challenge of producing a yearbook, but the environment does not become a threatening one. There have been tears, there have been temper tantrums, there have been four letter words, but those have all been in frustration, and they never outweigh the laughs and extreme pleasure as everything comes together. To keep the environment from becoming a threatening one we take snack breaks, have monthly birthday parties, and always keep the music going. We begin the course with team building activities and encourage everyone, regardless of grade level, to have a say in production
matters. The classroom and computer lab have become a “safe place” for the group, sometimes those students do not have other “safe places” in the building.

Some students aren’t prepared for the challenge, but they catch on and rise to the occasion. I don’t know if it’s the best system, but I make students responsible for all areas of their spreads. They must take pictures, they must write articles and captions, and they must contribute to the design. Finally, they need to use the design programs to put the pages together on the computer. While they often get assistance from others on areas where they don’t feel competent, they make attempts. Those attempts often involve going out of their comfort zones. Amy, a former editor, was one of the shyest students I have ever encountered. Imagine her surprise, when I pulled her from a spread that was almost finished to pick up the slack on the spread on the wrestling team. The next thing Amy knew, she was in the gym interviewing people she had never taken class with and learning sports terminology she had never heard before. Was she particularly excited to make that page? No. Did feel a sense of accomplishment when it was finished? Absolutely. I know she did because her father told me that Amy wrote her college essay about the experience.

This yearbook program exists in a highly competitive school with rigorous academic and athletic programs. September’s faculty meeting often beings with a rattling off of AP scores, SAT scores, and National Merit numbers. While those statistics are impressive to some and all well and good for my classroom, I worry about students who don’t fit into that environment. A course like Yearbook allows students to use other talents and have a place or a niche in the school community. Years ago, a student struggling with his academics told me how much he enjoyed his photography elective, so I asked him to enroll in Yearbook. He’s now a professional photographer in New York. I’m really not trying to toot my own horn. I had nothing to do with
his talent. I’m merely suggesting that students need a place, a non-threatening place, to feel a sense of belongingness to take artistic risks.

In examining the Yearbook classroom, Brain-Mind Learning Principles are clearly in effect. Caine’s complaints on student learning are legitimate concerns in today’s school systems. Caine explains, “Each teacher stuck to one text, and only the questions at the back mattered. I can remember thinking how silly it was to answer questions when all I had to do is find the place where the sentence was written in the book. No one seemed to care what students thought or felt personally. To this day, I can understand students who are bored and disinterested in school.” The Yearbook class is one place where students do not seem disinterested. They are actively using skills and knowledge from English, Math, Art, and Social Studies classes. They are engaged in creating a product in which they clearly have a vested interest. They might not go into careers in journalism, photography, or design; however, they are learning through techniques that will make them life-long learners.

Work Cited