

Adventures in Mentoring

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With the GOALS Project winding down and the Toolkit nearing completion, many of the participants in the Authentic Assessment Component felt that their work was not finished. We all felt strongly that we didn't want people to just take the Toolkit and photocopy the tools without truly understanding the what, why, and for whom the tool was designed. What better way of disseminating our tools than by setting up a mentoring project that would pair members of the Authentic Assessment group with partners that were interested in adapting tools from the Toolkit to their programs?

I felt fortunate to be both a coordinator and a mentor of the 6-month Partnership Project that ran from January to June of 1994. It was a luxury to be completely focused on one aspect of adult education: Authentic assessment in the ESL/ABE classroom. I was partnered with Widi Sumaryano who teaches ESL at Lutheran Services in West Springfield. Very early in our partnership, we developed a sense of trust between us, and we created a truly wonderful working relationship. This article will share our adventures and the unanticipated outcomes of the project.

Because of an ice storm, Widi and I were unable to attend the initial meeting of all the participants at the DOE in Malden. We arranged to have our own initial meeting at the International Language Institute of MA., Inc. (ILI) to discuss the logistics of the project. We had already spoken on a number of occasions and knew that we would be able to work together. At our initial meeting, we also talked about how we viewed assessment, what types of assessment we had previously done, and what types of assessment we were using in our programs. We discussed the Learner Log (see AiA, Fall, 1993) that ILI uses and decided to limit our scope of work and concentrate on two areas: weekly written evaluation forms and oral feedback.

We talked about how ILI uses oral feedback, and I asked Widi to try the following steps in his class:

- Elicit from students the activities that they did in the class and write what they say on the board
- Ask which activities were the most helpful in learning English
- Ask which activities were the least helpful in learning English
- Ask which activities they would like to see more of
- Ask which activities they would like never to see again

Oral feedback needs to be treated as a process that the teacher does consistently at the end of class, or after a certain activity that is new to the students and an activity on which the teacher wants immediate feedback. From the start, teachers need to depersonalize the feedback so that students understand that they are commenting on the activity and not the teacher. Teachers need to be clear as to why they are doing oral feedback in the class, and students need to understand why the teacher is taking class time to ask them questions about the class. By doing oral feedback, students are more prepared for weekly written evaluations that ask for feedback about the class, and if the students are satisfied with their progress in the class. Oral feedback is an ongoing process. As both teachers and students become more comfortable with oral feedback, teachers get better at facilitating it, and students get better at responding to it.

We set up a time for Widi to observe one of our classes at ILI. The timing was perfect as it was the start of the program, and he would be able to see how students were first exposed to the idea of feedback and the **Learner Log**. Widi suggested that he observe the class at the mid-term and at the end of the program so that he could fully understand the Intake, Ongoing, and Looking Back assessment at ILI. Widi chose two samples of weekly evaluations from ILI to review and try in his classes.

After Widi had observed a class at ILI, I asked him if he had learned anything from observing the instructor doing oral feedback. "Yes. I was able to observe what you had coached me to do and what I have tried several times. I think the idea of having oral feedback as a ritual thing is very good and I'll continue to do that because it has a sense of giving a nice closure to the class. The day is closed with this relaxing and sharing. There is an opportunity for students to say what they like and by doing that I feel more certain of what I will do tomorrow. I can be more prepared when doing my course planning knowing which activities students like or don't like."

Widi was very enthusiastic about the class and we began talking about other aspects of the class. He mentioned that he had seen familiar activities that he hadn't been using, and that he

was looking forward to trying these activities. He specifically commented on how the teacher was using a Total Physical Response (TPR) activity in the class. He used TPR in his class, but he noted that she had incorporated the activity to include the other skill areas and that he felt that he could and should be doing this in his class.

During the following months of the project, I saw a change in Widi. Through our telephone conversations I could hear him truly begin to understand the benefit of doing oral feedback with his students: "I'm getting a lot more feedback from my students when I ask them about the class. It's a completely different style of teaching than what I have been doing in my class. I never had a chance to do this before. Before I got involved with this project, I decided what to cover in the class. Now I feel that the students are choosing what they would like to do."

"I realize that doing oral feedback is a process where the teachers and students become more effective with feedback as time goes by. I feel that this is a very good notion that feedback is about the activity — about what we are doing in the class and not who we (the teachers) are. I'm interested in how I can facilitate feedback and how I will get the students to think about the activity and the value of the activity."

One of the major factors of our success as a mentoring team was due to the fact that we were the only participants from western Massachusetts. All the whole group meetings had been scheduled in Boston to accommodate the participants from the Eastern part of the state. Widi and I had more of an opportunity to get to know each other during the project as our travel time to and from our meetings was the forum to talk about assessment, and also to delve into other areas of our programs. Our "car talk" ranged from ESL techniques in the classroom to teacher training; from staff development to how to deal with a difficult program manager.

As the project went on, Widi became more confident with feedback and evaluation in his classes. As he saw the benefits from doing feedback, he had also been sharing this process with another ESL teacher in the program. Widi had asked the teacher to do oral feedback with his class, but what ensued caused him to stop dead in his tracks.

The teacher had tried oral feedback with his class and the feedback session became a negative experience for him; a student angrily accused the teacher that her needs were not being met by the way the class was taught. The teacher was angry with the feedback and annoyed at Widi for getting him to do feedback in his class.

Widi recounted to me that he had met with the teacher after the class and told him that most likely the student had had these feelings pent up and finally had the opportunity to vent. Widi suggested that the instructor do more oral feedback so that students wouldn't bottle things up. As

Widi related this incident to me, I found this situation very interesting: while I was coaching Widi, he was coaching his co-teacher. The episode with Widi and his co-teacher demonstrates the importance of establishing ground rules, a trusting environment, and a belief that the feedback is to benefit all parties involved when entering the realm of peer coaching.

Teachers need to understand not only why they are doing feedback, but they also need to be coached on how to facilitate the discussion. It's always difficult for the ego when someone has a negative comment about the class. It is hard not to think that the comment is directed at you, the teacher. Teachers need to be coached in facilitating feedback, and teachers and students alike need to understand that when they talk about the class they are talking about the activities, and not the personality of the teacher. We need to depersonalize the feedback by focusing on the activities rather than the teacher.

After the episode, Widi discussed why he had felt that his session with the teacher did not go well; that it was almost an authority-subordinate conflict. He said that he wished that he had posed more questions to the teacher about the class rather than talking so much about the class and what the teacher could have done in the class. He also mentioned that if he had done more peer evaluation with the instructor, maybe the instructor would have felt better about Widi's suggestions.

At the beginning of the Partnership Project, Widi had mentioned that he hadn't felt comfortable giving feedback to co-teachers. He felt that they also had experience, and he felt insecure in giving them feedback. Widi was carrying over his ideas of evaluation to other areas. He was not only doing evaluation with his class, but he was evaluating himself. He wasn't feeling insecure about doing feedback with the instructor, but had moved on to focusing on how he could improve his ability to give feedback and evaluation to his teachers.

Widi and I talked about working with other teachers and we came up with some strategies:

- Do more peer evaluations with the instructor
- Make sure the instructor observes Widi doing feedback and discuss what the instructor saw
- Pose questions to the instructor and try to get the instructor to reflect/comment on the class before Widi comments on it.

Widi and I both felt that we had been spending a lot of time on teacher training and that maybe we were getting side-tracked. We decided to focus more on the weekly written evaluations in subsequent meetings, but still touch base with what was going on with Widi and his co-teacher.

One of the important steps in establishing a good mentoring relationship is for the mentors to visit each other's program as many times as possible. It was extremely beneficial to our partnership to see the physical environment, meet the people and students, and discuss with staff and students what the Partnership Project was about. Having staff and students of the programs understand our project validated our belief that this was an important project.

Along with oral feedback, Widi had adapted our written weekly evaluation forms (Learner Logs) to his program, and found that as the students got used to the forms, they began to write more about the class and what they wanted to see more of in the class.

In May I observed Widi with the intention of giving him feedback about how he was doing oral feedback. I observed the whole class, and began taking notes on what he did in his class. Over coffee we talked about the class. I asked him if he wanted some feedback on the whole class, rather than just on how he was doing oral feedback. We reviewed the specific activities of the class, and I asked Widi if there was anything in the class that he didn't feel comfortable with. We also talked about why he had chosen an activity, and then ended our discussion with suggestions for future classes.

There is not a lot of staff development or support for ESL instructors in his program, and he was eager to hear what another ESL instructor had to say about his class. When he had been observed before in his program, it was by an administrator with no experience in teaching ESL. This was the first time that I had given feedback to a teacher that was not in our school. It seemed easier as we had been working closely over a period of time and had developed a feeling of trust. I felt that it was important to our relationship for Widi to observe me in the class and give me feedback about the activities he had observed. This kept our relationship on an even keel and demonstrated how we were learning from each other.

The partnership was successful because everything we focused on was modeled for Widi. Oral feedback with students, oral feedback with peers, and classroom activities all were set up for Widi to observe and comment on. Widi understood that what we were focusing on in this partnership wasn't "the only way" of giving feedback to his students and to his teachers, but he saw what we were doing as something useful and made the choice to extend what he was learning about assessment into other areas. This enabled Widi to grow professionally both inside and outside of the classroom.

The Partnership Project ended in June, but Widi and I continued to meet with each other. Not only did we continue our discussions about feedback and evaluation, but we also met to discuss our reflective pieces for *Adventures In Assessment*. This added piece made us both realize that

authentic assessment in the classroom and writing for the journal are on parallel: They both are a process, require constant revision, and share a feeling of never being the perfect piece or the perfect tool to measure progress.