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Teaching and Learning III

April 22, 2017

Round 3 Reflection

I’m going to begin this reflection by celebrating a success from my round. I was so pleased with how the starter went! On her round sheet, Kate listed the names of six students who she observed as being very engaged and vocal throughout the twenty minutes of the starter. On that list included the three students I struggle with the most in terms of behavior: Angel, Jesus, and Edwin. On only a handful of occasions have I been successful in gaining their attention and keeping it for an entire activity, so it felt great to have accomplished that with the Pacman activity. (It also definitely helped to have several other adults in the room.) Interestingly enough, from my perspective during the starter, it seemed like the class was pretty quiet as a whole. After hearing the observations from my round attendees, I realized that it felt quiet because students weren’t talking over each other or having side-conversations, and those three students in particular weren’t creating their usual noise. Adam pointed out that even if not all my students spoke during the starter, having a calmer classroom environment meant that students who are just quiet in general had the space to actually think about and make sense of the activity; their learning wasn’t as disrupted by their classmates as it usually is.

Witnessing and reflecting on this success has made me think about how I can facilitate more learning experiences like this. Tapping into my students’ passion for video games hooked a lot of them, and they’ve been really responsive to video clips on the few occasions I’ve shown them. I know that I need to continue to link math to my students’ interests, and perhaps I could incorporate more media into my units. In addition, I noticed that my students really like to notice things. When I did the jelly bean demonstration for the area model of the Pythagorean Theorem, I asked my students “What do you notice?” before I did the demo and then again after the demo. So many of them were eager to share, and I saw that same eagerness come out in the Pacman starter during my round when I asked them to notice Pacman’s movements. Thinking about this has made me reflect that recently I have been starting a lot of classes with some sort of skills practice that only has one right answer, instead of something that’s more accessible for all students and naturally engenders multiple representations/ways of thinking. Giving students entry points into the material is a major component of my teaching philosophy, and although I think I did it well during my round and often do it well with my numeracy class, I need to be more consistent about it going forward for this class in particular.

My other major takeaway from my round was that I needed to provide better scaffolds for the transition from watching Pacman move in a maze to plotting shapes on a coordinate grid. While I did do a brief review of plotting coordinates between the starter and the graphing activity, I didn’t take the time to make sure that all students were paying attention and plotting the points on their own papers. Looking back, I think I was hurrying through that review for two reasons. First, I assumed that my students knew how to plot points since we had done that at several different points throughout the year. To be honest, I think I knew deep down that of course many of my students hadn’t mastered this skill, but just really wanted to believe that by this point in their math education they had learned to plot x-y coordinates. The second reason why I hurried through the graphing review was that the starter took up more time than I had anticipated and I wanted to make sure that students had sufficient time to get a good start on the Points of Interest activity.

Based on my round participants’ observations and suggestions, I realized that my students needed some sort of intermediate step between Pacman and the Points of Interest activity. With the Pacman starter, they only watched Pacman move in a video. Perhaps it would have been helpful to give them paper cutouts of Pacman and have them move those at their tables and maybe even on a coordinate grid. That sort of physical manipulation could have helped them better understand the idea of transformations and what it looks like on a coordinate plane. When originally planning this unit before I realized that I didn’t have that much time to teach it, I had included an activity in which students moved shapes on a grid according to different transformation commands. However, I cut it out when I shortened the unit. This was a good reminder to me that shortening a unit does not mean that I have to sacrifice proper scaffolding. I know that with more experience with planning and teaching, I’ll learn how to include quick and quality scaffolds.

In terms of providing more support for my students’ attempts at plotting coordinates, I created a starter for the class the day after the round that had different Pacman-related objects positioned at different points on a grid. Students had to identify the coordinates and quadrant of each object and then place two additional objects at points of their choice. The next time I teach this unit, I will have my students do this activity right after the original Pacman starter, for that would give them a review of graphing without completely losing the Pacman concept, as well as make the connection between the Pacman and Points of Interest activities more explicit.