



Reflective Essays

Understanding something means...

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I have always had that concern since that question showed up to my life. I was in an English Teaching Practicum class. It was one of the first sessions, so we had to answer a questionnaire about teaching. The first questions were easy: motivations, expectations, previous experiences, etc. However, one question was extremely complex and difficult to me. “What does ‘understand something’ mean?” After thinking more than I expected, I realized that I did not really know what understanding something meant. I remember that I wrote the following: “to have something clear.” I admit that it was not the answer I wanted to write at that moment; nevertheless, I knew that if I had written “to keep something in your head”, the professor would have told me that memorizing is not understanding. If I had looked in the dictionary, I would have found a more complex definition. Maybe, I would have had to explain it in detail. I did not want to get more confused than I was.

As a teacher, I believed it was unacceptable to leave behind those terms like “understanding something”. How could I teach to understand another language, if I did not know the meaning of “understanding”? Notwithstanding, that question ended up in the air. I started creating lesson plans, going to schools, and so on. Being honest, I was more focused on how to enhance English skills and on reflecting on my lesson plans in order to make students understand readings, songs, etc. I forgot that question, and I “passed” my English Teaching Practicum course. At the end, I thought I had it clear; that I had understood what “understanding” was.

Months passed by, and the quarantine arrived. I am literally a “bookworm”. I used to spend every single day at the library working, reading, studying, etc. Therefore, when I could not go to the university because of the pandemic, I got really stressed out and frustrated. I wanted to feel I was learning and that I was not wasting my time. The truth is that I like to keep my mind busy. Due to the pandemic situation, several universities were giving free courses about several topic from languages to arts. I decided to take one of those courses in order to practice my English and maybe learn something new. When I was checking the list of courses, I noticed the word “Literacy”. Immediately, I had a flashback from one of my Didactics II classes. Once, the professor asked for the meaning of the word “Literacy”. I had read many articles about something related to literacy, particularly critical literacy. However, I could not get the main idea of it. I remember that a classmate mentioned that literacy means the ability to read and write. The professor sighed and told us that literacy had to do with understanding the world, not only words but images, gestures, even ideas, the several representations of “language”, etc.

Thus, I decided to take that free course. Perhaps, it could help me give a definite answer to the question that I was still unable to respond firmly.

The name of this course was “Literacy Teaching and Learning: Aims, Approaches and Pedagogies”*. It was offered by the University of Illinois, a college focused on education. The professors that guided the course were Dr. William Cope and Dr. Mary Kalantzis. They had worked with several other researchers on a book called “Multiliteracies”, and many of its content were focused on language teaching. I had never felt so amused and surprised that, as a languages teacher, I had no idea about many aspects regarding language and teaching. I consider that I have a lot of theoretical and practical background provided by the undergraduate program. Nevertheless, there were a lot of things that were not totally clear in that teacher training formation: the evolution of the language, the appearance of “Schools”, the how and the why of teaching languages, and, the most important one, the ways of understanding the world and interacting with it. First, it is important to find the relationship between understanding the world with language teaching. The key in these two concepts is the word “communication”. Communication does not depend on the ability to solely read and write, or even speak in our language or another language, as we tend to believe. Communication is the key for human expression; we need to interact with ourselves, others, and our surroundings, etc. Language is the way we achieve that communication, and that was the main role of Literacy. Consequently, Literacy is now conceived as the symbolic representation of language; the authors said that if language becomes symbolic, we change the way in which we experience and understand life and the world. That was the answer, “experience”! That is why, I finally understood why it was so complex to answer that big question of understanding something. As language teachers, we tried to make our students read, talk, and write in English. However, they do not understand it, they do not experience it. It is not “language” for them; there is no literacy. I remember the times I learned English at school. I started “understanding” the English language when I finally caught the idea of a song or a series. Afterwards, I had the opportunity to talk to an English speaker in a lounge. My English alive in me because I experienced it. It was real to me; I understood English and it became part of me.

For me, understanding something means not only talking about a theoretical concept, memorizing copious amounts of content, or just having something clear, as I wrote that time in the questionnaire. Now, I consider understanding something as the ability to make real meanings for us based on the way we experience the knowledge that is surrounding or even inside us. Besides, I think that my perception about teaching changed as well. Nowadays, I try to make things different when I plan classes. I avoid getting focused on the skills themselves, but rather I look at how I can transform those skills into something real and meaningful for my students.

*Cope, W., & Kalantzis, M. (n.d.). *Literacy teaching and learning: Aims, approaches and pedagogies*.
<https://www.coursera.org/learn/literacy-teaching-learning>