Disruptive Pedagogy: *Guerrilla* Tactics in Large Classes

Viola Manokore, Doug McRae

Department of Practical Nursing, NorQuest College, Alberta, Canada.

Abstract

Guerrilla instructional strategy is when one instructor (the guerrilla) enters into their colleague's class that is in session unannounced, sits for a while to gain insight on what topic is being taught, takes over and facilitates students' learning for about ten minutes and then leaves the classroom. The strategy is disruptive as an unconventional approach to enhance student engagement and learning. The temporary takeover of roles is designed to be a surprise to students. In addition, the host is not privy to what the guerrilla's plan is. In this paper, we share themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of our teaching reflections and our students' experiences with guerrilla pedagogy. It was evident that students appreciated having two experts who have different instructional strategies collaborate in ways that captured their interests. The experience was positive and fostered a strong sense of respect and trust between colleagues. The "guerrillas" felt vulnerable as they implemented the strategy

Keywords: guerrilla; teaching; learning, experiences.

1. Introduction

In this study, we used *guerrilla* instructional strategy to facilitate students' learning of key concepts within two courses namely pathophysiology and human anatomy and physiology. *Guerrilla* instructional strategy is when one instructor enters a class in session, sits for about 5 minutes and then temporarily takes over the instruction for about ten minutes and then leaves the room unannounced. According to Anderson and Fierstein (2018), *guerrilla*-teaching approach is an unconventional approach that is designed to achieve conventional powerful learning dynamics. The approach is unconventional in the sense that one instructor temporarily takes over the instruction in a way that disrupts the instructional strategy of their peer. Weems (2013) pointed out that *guerrilla* pedagogy is "a form of engagement that makes use of a wide range of strategies, tactics, and missives toward the aim of reterritorializing both the academy and what counts as knowledge production" (p. 51). The teaching and learning norms are challenged by the unconventional approach that has its roots in flash mob phenomenon. The strategy has an element of surprise and suspense for the students. As pointed out by Weems (2013), memorable experiences includes situations where learning "surprise the very subjectivity of the subject" (p. 55). Having students surprised by the entry and takeover of instruction by the guerrilla instructor created a different learning and teaching dynamic that could be memorable to the students. Wills (2007) pointed out that creating memorable and fun learning environments helps students with information processing and long-term memory. The argument on how learning is enhanced by enjoyable learning environment is also supported by neuroscience. Thanos et al (1999) indicated that the brain chemical transmitters related to students' level of comfort and enjoyment could influence information processing and storage in the brain. The disruptive learning experience has a potential of creating memorable experiences that could result in an increase in long-term retention of the material presented. Our desire is to create learning environments that support students' information processing and storage in the brain.The main aim of this study was to implement a disruptive instructional strategy that would engage students and facilitate their learning of some key concepts in the courses taught by the "*guerrillas*". This paper explores instructors and students' experiences with *guerrilla* pedagogy.

2. Method

2.1. Study context

The study was implements at a community college in Canada. Students enrolled in the two courses taught by the *guerrillas* participated in the study. A total of four sections each with about a hundred students (a total of about 400 students) experienced the *guerrilla* pedagogy. The courses taught by the two instructors are pathophysiology for health

professionals and human anatomy and physiology. The participants were students enrolled in a practical nursing program. The two *guerrilla* instructors have been teaching the two courses for six years and they are very familiar with the content. One of the instructors has a master degree in nursing- considers himself as a content expert who also utilizes educational technology. The other instructor has a doctorate in curriculum, instruction and teacher education, a masters degree and undergraduate degrees in biological sciences- considers herself as having technological, pedagogical content knowledge.

2.2. Rules for Guerrilla Pedagogy

Anderson and Fierstein (2018) argued that *guerrilla* teaching approach as an unconventional method that is designed to create a powerful learning environment. These authors described certain ground rules for guerrilla teaching, see figure 1 below
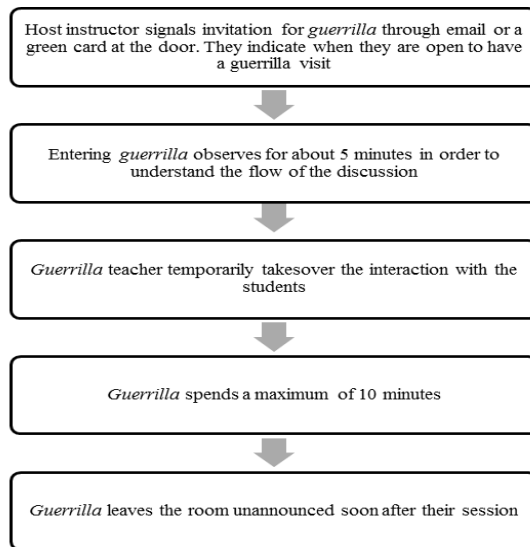


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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Host instructor signals invitation for guerrilla │
│ through email or a green card at the door. They   │
│ indicate when they are open to have a guerrilla   │
│ visit                                             │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                      ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Entering guerrilla observes for about 5 minutes   │
│ in order to understand the flow of the discussion │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                      ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Guerrilla teacher temporarily takesover the       │
│ interaction with the students                     │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                      ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Guerrilla spends a maximum of 10 minutes          │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                      ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Guerrilla leaves the room unannounced soon after  │
│ their session                                     │
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Figure 1. Rules for Guerrilla Instruction

Each class experienced four guerrilla visits. The guerrillas used the DEAL reflection model (Ash & Clayton, 2009) to reflect on their experiences before and after the visits. In their reflections, the guerrillas Described their experiences, Examined what went on and Articulated their Learning (DEAL). At the end of the semester, the *guerrillas* shared their reflections with each other. They only shared parts of the reflection they were comfortable in sharing. Students who consented to providing feedback completed an end of course evaluation sharing their experiences with *guerrilla* pedagogy. This paper presents data that emerged from the thematic analysis of the students' responses to open - ended course evaluation questions and the *guerillas*' reflections.

3. Results and Discussion

During the process of *guerrilla* teaching the initial intent was to enhance student learning. The added or secondary benefit of instructor learning also emerged during the process. Figure 2 below shows the main emerging themes on students and instructors' experiences with guerrilla pedagogy and some examples of direct quotes. It is important to note that, there were some shared experiences between students and their instructors.
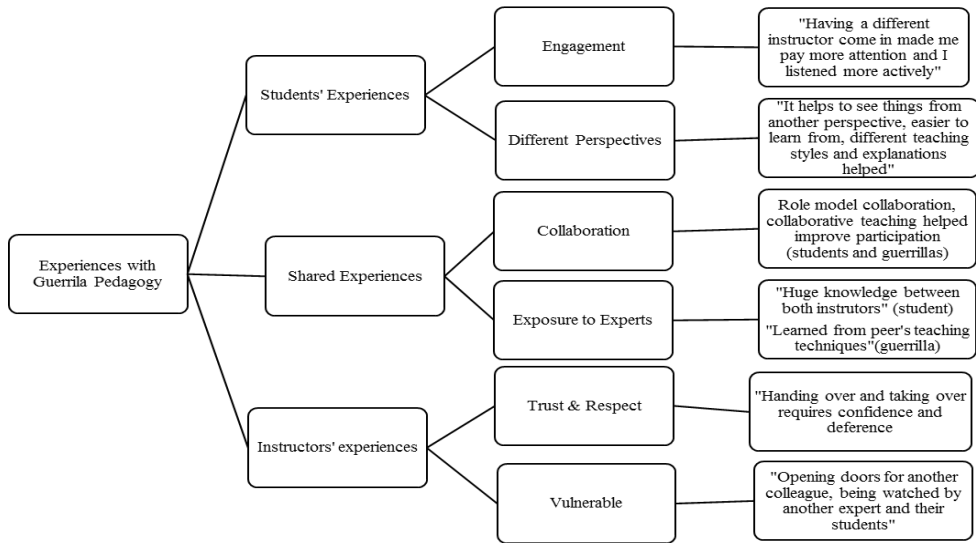

Figure 2. Themes on Instructor and Students' Experiences

3.1. Students' Experiences

Students indicated that having a surprise visit by the *guerrilla* instructor helped them to focus and improved their engagement. They pointed out that they benefited from interacting with the guerrilla. Though we did not formally measure student learning, their feedback demonstrates that the *guerrilla* surprise and instruction were memorable and enjoyable. According to Wills (2007), students learn better when they enjoy the experience and that when they are bored- "information flow to the higher cognitive networks is limited and learning process grinds to a halt" (p. 2). As a result, it can be inferred that by creating memorable events/activities and fun learning environment, educators enhance students learning and storage in long-term memory. A student stated that they felt more confident with what they learnt from the *guerrilla* instructor. Another student stated "… it was very inclusive and sometimes different teachers have a way of explaining things that make what

we are studying easier. Some have a playful attitude that make it more engaging and fun and it's interesting when different teachers work together as we get to hear the perspective of others". The survey showed that 92.86% of participants who completed the end of course survey enjoyed having the *guerrilla* surprise in their classroom. It is also important to note that, on day one of implementing the *guerrilla* strategy, students clapped and had a standing ovation as the *guerrilla* instructor was exiting the room. Students' written, verbal and non-verbal feedback was evidence of how the approach helps to create a dynamic learning environment in large classes. It is interesting that most students indicated that the time the *guerrilla* spent in their class was enough though they wanted more visits. Students pointed out that their attention span aligns with the time spent by the *guerrilla* in their classroom. A student who did not like the approach commented that they were used to instructional strategies of their instructor and having another come in put them off for a while.

3.2. Instructor's Experiences

Though the main aim was to enhance student learning, the opportunity also provided instructor learning moments. Waghid (2014) argued that it is important for the educator to disrupt pedagogical encounters and reflect on what counts as good teaching. Through critical reflections, we noticed that we both learned from each other during the process. Observing a colleague facilitate learning to your students in a different way and seeing student reactions also enhanced our instructional skills. Crow and Smith (2005) pointed out that the strongest collaborative teaching relationships are built on a foundation of empathy and trust. We believe that we came out of the experience as a stronger collaborative team who trust each other more. As argued by Pope-Ruark and Moner (2019), we also became "intellectually and emotionally available for each other" (p.14). We allowed each other to be vulnerable and supported each other. In addition, we modeled collaboration in ways that were noticed and appreciated by our students in their feedback. Though we did not plan together, we both learned from this unique form of collaboration where we opened doors for each other, observed a peers interaction with students and we also learned from each other alternative ways of presenting the same material. Through critical reflection before and after a class visit, we increased personal awareness of our instructional strategies from different angles. As a result, we gained insights on areas we could improve on.

4. Conclusions

Based on students' feedback, they valued having a *guerrilla* instructor surprise them and commented that they had an opportunity to learn from different perspectives and instructional strategies. Students indicated that having two content experts who have different instructional strategies helped them to engage with learning materials and paid more attention to what was being presented. Two students indicated that they did not like

the strategy- one said it was a show off and the other said it disrupted her notes taking because she got confused on what was going on. What we learned from students' feedback is that majority of them enjoyed the experience and they indicated that it enhanced their learning. It was encouraging to see students' reactions and to read their comments about how much they valued the experience and that the combined knowledge and expertise was good to have in a classroom. However, we are cognisant of the fact that different students have different learning preferences.

From the reflections, we also learned that the *guerrilla* instructional strategy is a great collaborative teaching method. Unlike other collaborative activities where instructors plan together, *guerrilla* strategy saves time because instructors do not have to plan together. The strategy provided lots of learning opportunities as the host watched the *guerrilla* interacting with students in a different way. Teachers usually close their doors when teaching- with *guerrilla* approach, the door is open at any time that is suitable for the *guerrilla* to visit. Our trust and respect of each other as peers got stronger with each visit. At the same time, each successive *guerrilla* session decreased the instructor's feelings of apprehension and vulnerability.

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