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Eureka: Identifying what it means to practice student-centered teaching in a hypermodern age

Abstract

Purpose. This paper provides a critical reflection on higher educational practice in the field of corporate communication and public relations in order to identify theoretically informed best practices to meet student learning needs in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

Approach. Using personal ethnography, this article to analyzes industry-articulated limitations in the knowledge and skill sets of new communication practitioners, reviews contemporary literature identifying the learning needs of today's students, and proposes a set of best practices based on the literature and the author's own journey as a higher education practitioner of 20 years.

Findings. Professional reports and reflections on the state of higher education for the field of corporate communication suggests that collectively we are not creating environments for modern students to thrive and nor are we meeting the industry's expectations in a 'hypermodern' world. I argue that in order to meet both the industry's needs and satisfy student needs, there are a set of best practices that incorporate elements of entertainment, engagement, and an 'open-world' approach that places the student experience at the core of each class and overall course design. In so doing, I provide recommendations for learning design with successful examples of these approaches within a public relations curriculum.

Implications and Limitations. Using a personal ethnography approach to higher education with a critical engagement with the literature, this analysis provides key principles that need to be tested with qualitative and quantitative research. However, I argue that these principles provide a strong basis for a research agenda on creating a more student-centered approach to higher education in communication.

Originality/Value. By reducing the gaps between practitioner needs and new graduate knowledge and skills, higher education can better serve both groups' interests.

Keywords: communication education, personal ethnography, social cognitive theory, entertaining overcoming resistance model, extended elaboration likelihood model, universal design

The introduction of social media and digital tools has fundamentally changed the ways that people engage with organizations – shifting from mass communication models to more adaptive and engagement models (Fotopoulou & Couldry, 2015). People can customize the information they consume, the places they access that information from, and what they do with that information. Though the positive and negative outcomes of these changes can be debated, the operational realities for people in corporate communications, and public relations more specifically, are undeniable (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011).

All of this is emerging at a time when questions about the readiness of new graduates to enter the workplace is generating considerable debate within the field of communication. Some research suggests that new graduates have core skills deficiencies compared to supervisor expectation (Todd, 2014). For example, competencies in the growing field of social media are often lacking (Macnamara, Lwin, Adi, & Zerfass, 2015; Tench, Verl, & Tkalac, 2013; Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2013). Further, other research identifies the difficulties in developing the necessary critical and creative thinking skills to be effective corporate communication practitioners (Tallent & Barnes, 2015). However, in an era where crises are increasingly common and social responsibility is an emergent expectation for doing business research also suggests that new graduates value transparency and ethical decision making as public relations practitioners (Curtin, Gallicano, & Matthews, 2011). Yet, only a minority of development needs for communicators are addressed through suitable training programs (Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2012).

Additionally, Generations Y and Z are fundamentally different from the generations that came before them because they are moving into hypermodern times and a changing communications landscape (Zerfass, Verčič, & Volk, 2017). This inevitability includes technological shifts and familiarity with hypermodern tools and techniques for engagement on personal and professional levels. Unfortunately, research also suggests that not all ‘digital natives' have similar levels of digital literacy because socioeconomic status influences the ways in which millennials are able to engage with different applications and the Internet more broadly (Buckingham, 2015; Hargittai, 2010).

Given these realities, I argue that traditional approaches to education and training in corporate communication are often inadequate to meet the requirements for the profession and the new generation of practitioners. In fact, I suggest that the field – its practitioners and academics – needs to reconsider the relationship between digital environments, access to the field from diverse populations, and take the opportunity to redefine our relationships to knowledge in the new digital environment (Littlejohn, Beetham, & McGill, 2012). Therefore, using the arguments for universal design in higher education as a framework, I reflect on my own experience and propose best practices that are grounded by three learning and persuasion theories – social cognitive theory, entertaining overcoming resistance model, and the extended elaboration likelihood model. I also will identify best practices for course design and activities based on these experiences and theories.

Universal Design in Education

When considering the changes to both the educational environment and modern student needs, interests, and concerns I like to think of the changes as being similar to the evolution from the two-dimensional platform games, like Donkey Kong in the 1980's to the open-world multi-platform games of today like the World of Warcraft or Grand Theft Auto today. The objectives and skillsets to be successful instructors have grown substantially. Palmer (2014) makes the point that today's students tend to be visual, tactual, or kinesthetic learners rather than auditory learners because they have been conditioned by modern multimedia environment in which they have grown up.

Palmer (2014) and van Ingen, et al. (2015) have found that one of the critical problems for modern learners, however, is a lack of self-efficacy largely attributable to consistent helicopter parenting. This means that at the same time as today's students are often self-confident and high-achieving learners focused on goals of good grades and good jobs, they are also resistant to negative feedback because instead of seeing it as a pathway to improvement, they see it as a roadblock to their objectives (Palmer, 2014, van Ingen, et al., 2015). When teaching approaches in higher education fail to appreciate student resistance to negative feedback it often leads to lower levels of trust in instructors and the educational process suggesting that traditional models of delivery fail to improve student self-efficacy and result in students graduating without the critical field-specific knowledge and skills required (Palmer, 2014, van Ingen, et al., 2015).

Palmer (2014) argues that the principles of universal design provide a template for modern approaches to higher education. Universal design provides three educational design principles to help adapt to the needs of today's learners: (1) providing resources and learning materials supporting multi-modal learning ranging from visual aids, videos, in-class exercises, and lectures; (2) providing an immersive environment where students can discuss the convergence of theory and practice, developing exercises that maximize student learning, and collaborations between instructors and students to target professional skills; and (3) providing multiple methods to engage student learners using flexible goals, methods, materials, and assessments to create 'expert learners that are resourceful, knowledgeable, strategic, goal-oriented, purposeful, and motivated.

The Role of Personal Ethnography in Communication Education Design and Delivery

Because of the nature of our role as educators with new groups of students and/or different classes each semester, auto-ethnographic methods can help to systematically capture those 'eureka' moments as we critically evaluate our performance against our own objectives as well as the expectations of students, departments, universities, and the fields in which we teach. In Crawford's (1996) discussion of personal ethnography, he describes eureka moments of life that can inform research and theory development.

Crawford (1996) grounds his analysis in two assumptions. First, he argues that it is important to remove the privilege of research from ethnographies because expertise in any area comes from personal experience. Second he argues that expertise is subject to what we can verify as well as emotional vulnerabilities, intellectual instability, and academic suspicion. Accordingly, he posits a second assumption that "old" ways of making meaning are obsolete because we, as ethnographers, ought to focus on our own behavior as relating information about a situations or cultural events.

Crawford (1996) proposes that personal ethnography provides valuable insights into problems and interpretive knowledge citing three primary advantages. First, it allows the ethnographer to be mindful of relationships they might build during their own experiences. This means that the ethnographer does not have to artificially separate him or herself as "researcher" to suspend interpersonal relationships. Second, he suggests personal ethnography also decreases the intrusiveness of the inquiry because the researcher uses his/her own experiences as a basis for analysis. At the heart of Crawford's (1996) argument for autoethnography is the proposition that we are already in interesting contexts of study as we negotiate our daily lives. Taking the ethnographic turn simply suggests that we make ourselves aware of the consequences of our actions. Third, he argues that we cannot "know" everything about any group, but analyzing singular interactions produces knew knowledge and insights that can serve as a window for readers to better understand the groups or phenomena studied.

In order to accommodate these ends, Crawford (1996) suggests that personal ethnography is therefore about the self-report of personal experiences and includes the following as part of the report. First, as his discussion of the "ethnographic turn" described, the background to any narration is particularly important. This helps to set the stage and contextualize the personal experiences of the ethnographer in the narrower schema of the study. Second, he emphasizes that the story told is that of the ethnographer and that it should be the narration of those observations. Third, a focus on the personal experience and observations of the researchers also suggests that we are trying to describe other people, but it is accomplished through framing their experiences in our worldview. Finally, the voice of the ethnographer is one of many possible voices. To this extent, he argues that the personal ethnography is more like a guerrilla action, something subtle, yet potentially powerful in creating a larger narrative. Crawford (1996) suggests that this process helps to foster reflexivity on the part of the ethnographer, repositions the authors as the object of inquiry, and fragments the perception of the ethnographer's awareness (i.e., they cannot be all-knowing if it is just one of the possible stories being told).

In practice, therefore, personal ethnography is a viable way to critically reflect on teaching pedagogy, address problems that have emerged across multi-national data-based projects, and connect theory with experience in the classroom in order to draw out grounded recommendations from my own experiences that can be tested and evaluated with future research.

Three Eureka Moments

There are three moments in my academic career that have proven to be formative on my views and development as an educator. First, I have a competitive speech and debate background and was a part of nationally competitive teams both as a student competitor and as a coach. This is worth mentioning because in my third year at university I had a conversation (argument) with my coach that fundamentally changed my perspective about communication and even influences my research agenda today. Before this conversation, I used to think that it was enough to be right – so I researched, I read, and I believed that having truth on my side was the only thing that mattered (ah, the joys of being 20 and an idealist). After losing a very frustrating elimination round of debate where my opponent was simply wrong – I had better evidence and presented it but I still lost, I was venting in the van ride home. My coach very patiently tried to offer reasonable explanations, I still maintained a single-minded righteous indignation at how I was wronged because I had truth and better research on my side. Finally, my coach heard enough and proclaimed (and yes, I still remember the quote 25 years later), "*How long are you going to keep making me defend a decision I think is wrong. Do you want to win or lose?*" I hate to lose.

This conversation not only made me a better debater where I started to win close rounds, rounds I would have lost before, and focus on my judge's communicative needs but it also changed my academic path. Instead of focusing me as the center of my communication universe, my interest was how my message would be received. I changed my major from political science (heavy in political philosophy) to communication and even today my research agenda focuses on improving stakeholder engagement. It is safe to say that this was one of those 'eureka moments' that Crawford (1996) discussed.

A second moment that would shape the way that I view classroom teaching came in my first semester of my Ph.D. program where one of our professors – who had won countless student-nominated outstanding instructor of the year awards – offered us his single piece of advice on teaching. He told us that we had to 'entertain our students' and if we were good enough at it, that we would end up 'fooling them into learning'. Of course he was not talking about deception; rather, about the importance of setting the tone and the mood in our classes to ensure that the students were receptive to the information, hard work, and feedback. This is something that I have tried to apply across classes, departments, platforms for teaching delivery and countries for the last 20 years.

Finally, in 2010 my university was beginning to offer more classes online, our master's program was completely online, and the university offered a $5,000 stipend for any staff member who was going to be teaching online and would take an intensive week-long course to redesign their class using a Quality Matters framework. If I am honest, they had me at the $5,000 stipend. I was not expecting that short-course would fundamentally change my view of what was necessary to deliver a student-centered experience, no matter the platform for delivery (i.e., online, blended, or face-to-face), but it did. The framework focused on the principle of an aligned classroom experience producing a better student experience. What the aligned class meant was that, as instructors, we needed to map our overall class objectives against every activity, lecture, and assignment that we wrote. My university experience had been that we went to classes to learn about topics that we were interested in and then figured out how to apply them in our own lives. I am old enough to remember when education was not yet a commodity or viewed as a service. It is today, whether we like it or not, so it is incumbent upon instructors to adapt to the expectations so that our lifelong learning objectives can meet today's student expectations. This means presenting information in a way that is aligned and demonstrates value to today's student experience. Whereas before I did not think about building these connections into a more purposeful design until the online education training. Now that is a meaningful part of every class that I design and deliver.

In many of the classes that I teach, I have small reflective assignments to encourage students to think about those connections between what we learned in class and professional outcomes and development. What I see emerging in those student narratives is the way that I have framed the class activities for the students. Cynically, we could say that the students are writing for their instructor and that could be a fair interpretation. Less cynically, what I see in those comments are students internalizing the class activities into their own goals and aspirations and reflecting on them – not in a way that parrots my objective, but in an applied way.

Designing Classes for Higher Education in an Open World Environment

Over the last 20 years, I have had the good fortune of teaching in two different countries, with very diverse student bodies. When I consider the key elements of transferrable knowledge based on my own research and experience, universal design framework, and knowledge of persuasion and education theory, I have identified two best practices in communication instructional design that apply across platforms of delivery and resonate no matter what students we are teaching.

Building Student Efficacy: Social Cognitive Theory's Contribution

Targeting positive efficacy has long been established as central to improving educational outcomes (Bandura, 1982, 1986, 1997, 2006). Bandura argued that the process of learning is based on three determinants – personal belief in the ability to perform the act (self-efficacy), the outcomes of correctly performing the act (response efficacy), and environmental factors that might influence an individual's ability to successfully perform the act and thus argued that the process of learning is grounded by how people model their behaviors (Bandura, 1986, 1997, 2006). Efficacy has a number of influences on human behavior including governing choices about behaviors to enact, influences motivations to act, and ultimately efficacy itself becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy – that is when people believe they will be successful in the end, they are much more likely to be successful and when people believe they will perform poorly, they are much more likely to avoid those actions or behaviors (Bandura, 1997; Fouad, 2012; Frisby, Sellnow, Lane, Veil, & Sellnow, 2013; Peterson, 2010; Verroen, Gutteling, & Vries, 2013; Witte, 1996).

Research suggests that self-efficacy can be developed or improved in four ways. First, self-efficacy can be improved via mastery experiences which is a process that helps individuals learn new behaviors or skills by focusing on small simple tasks that lead to more complex objectives – by building on positive small experiences, people are more likely to improve their willingness to try new related behaviors and be more successful in doing so (e.g., Bandura, 1986, Palmer, 2014). Second, self-efficacy can be improved through social modeling – that is providing an identifiable model that demonstrates the process to accomplish a behavior (e.g., Bandura, 1986, 1997). Third, self-efficacy is enhanced if people's physical and emotional states are positive. The more relaxed and rested the more likely people will be successful; however, the more impatient or uncertain, the less likely people will be in achieving the goal behavior (Bandura, 1986; Hemmings, 2012; Witte, 1996). Finally, Bandura argues that because learning is best improved in a social setting, it is also a persuasive activity where if people are in a learning environment where they feel encouraged, regardless of outcome they are more likely to risk initial 'failure' at performing actions (Bandura, 1986).

Applied lessons in building efficacy. Communication is an applied field. Yet, as the introduction to this piece pointed out, there are significant knowledge and practical gaps in new graduates' abilities to demonstrate the critical skills – both soft and hard skills – required of today's communications professionals (see e.g., Macnamara, et al., 2015). Many universities and my own colleagues' answer to this gap is to push students to more and more work experiences, internships, and placements. Certainly, this is a useful avenue for developing efficacy by doing in 'the real world'. The push for placements and internships does ignore the reality that such placements are often not options for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, when students do go on long-term placements, one of the points of feedback we routinely receive from employers about is that the students have knowledge and skills but do not fully engage. This is a problem of efficacy (Palmer, 2014, van Ingen, et al., 2015), so we cannot rely on work experience to build efficacy; this must be done in the classroom and requires design consideration.

There are many ways to build efficacy if we follow Bandura's guidance; however, in my experience of teaching classes like crisis communication, digital public relations, and research methods – all classes that apply theory to practice and expect demonstrable expertise – I have found a number of class design tools that build efficacy. First, routine (i.e., weekly) low risk (but graded) in-class assignments where students can take risks, try new tools, and are pushed to make tangible recommendations based on their own knowledge and skills meet Bandura's recommendations for building mastery experiences and learning in a social setting where they feel encouraged. Along with this, I often use portfolio-based assessments with reflection in skills-oriented classes like digital media and research methods so that students are encouraged to critically reflect on their strengths and weaknesses while earning high grades for the reflection and not the quality of the execution, which provides support for Bandura's argument for mindfulness of learners' positive physical and mental states.

Second, mastery experiences in some subjects, like crisis communication, can be difficult (if not impossible) to achieve in work placements because students and new graduates often are not perceived as competent to be a part of these types of teams. As a result, I actively incorporate simulation and collaborative research exercises to build mastery experiences and social modeling in these kinds of classes as well. For example, in crisis communication students in my class will go through an eight-hour simulation of a crisis outbreak and be expected to work through the initial stages of the crisis response to a moving, complex, and unstable situation. In their reflections, students often cite this as one of the most enriching experiences they have and note the transferrable skills they gain from the simulation, which is aligned from the research on the value that simulations provide in building efficacy (Morgan, Cleave-Hogg, Desousa, & Lam-Mcculloch, 2006). The simulations are low risk, so students can make mistakes and we can discuss their errors and better ways of responding, so they are not only building mastery, but provide good models for responding, and are done in an environment to support a positive experience where they feel encouraged.

But simulations are not the only way to achieve vicarious experience – in research methods, I often build collaborative research opportunities with students where we tackle a research project that is likely to be ultimately presented at conference and published. Students can experience the research process first-hand but be guided in their work in a coaching or mentoring context. When it comes to introducing quantitative methods to communication students this approach provides the encouragement, social modeling, mastery experiences, and positive conditions where students feel they can be successful.

Educators Must Be Persuasive: Overcoming Resistance, Providing Entertainment

Building efficacy is my first principle, but then the question is how to make sure that there is student buy in. Like I learned as a debater nearly three decades ago, being right does not matter if we are not persuasive. Yet, most educators (probably rightly) do not think of themselves as entertainers – especially in higher education; however, if educators fail to make the educational process entertaining they will probably not be as successful in overcoming modern student suspicion about higher education or reactions to negative feedback. Moyer-Guse's (2008) model of entertainment education for overcoming resistance as well as Slater and Rouner's (2002) extended elaboration likelihood model provide important insights into why and how learning can be improved if it is enjoyable.

Entertainment education is not focused on traditional learning environments; rather it refers to embedding pro-social messages into popular entertainment media content (Moyer-Guse, 2008). Moyer-Guse (2008) explains that entertainment education influences behaviors for two principle reasons – people become involved with the narrative and characters.

Entertainment (e.g., video games, movies, books, television programs, etc.) uses a narrative structure that creates a sense of involvement with the action because viewers or participants can watch events unfold becoming engrossed in the storyline instead of their immediate environment making them more susceptible to persuasive messages. Moyer-Guse (2008) directly links efficacy and social cognitive theory to entertainment education and argues that Slater and Rouner's (2002) extended elaboration likelihood model (E-ELM) has demonstrated a strong connection with changing attitudes and behaviors. E-ELM is an extension of Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) elaboration likelihood model. Slater and Rouner (2002) argue that instead of focusing on the degree of engagement with the narrative, the narrative itself is the driving persuasive route when effectively developed. In short, efficacy is easier to build if people can identify with the narrative or people involved.

These factors suggest that content, design, and identification can provide for different pathways to the acceptance of a message and has important potential implications for education suggesting that well-designed and well-delivered curriculum should help to improve student acceptance of not only the content of the material but also feedback and rigor. Moyer-Guse's model uses entertainment to overcome resistance and provides a path to overcoming the potential conflict between student reactions to negative feedback and the need to provide a challenging curriculum with extensive critical feedback. In short, entertainment helps to overcome resistance by putting people in a receptive frame of mind by encouraging vicarious modeling, identification with the characters and narrative, and removing perceived barriers between the persuasive message and the learner's own goals or beliefs (Moyer-Guse, 2008, Slater & Rouner, 2002). Both persuasion theories target improved efficacy as a core objective at improving an audience's likelihood that a persuasive message will be accepted. Yet, both lack a direct connection between entertainment to higher education.

Showmanship and polish matters… along with knowing our audience. To put this as simply as possible, good instructors are not only good public speakers, we should be good storytellers. Certainly, we all must work with our own styles and what we are comfortable doing. For example, I have a very dry sense of humor and like a good groaner joke, so my PowerPoint and chat in class incorporates those in because that is who I am. But I consciously incorporate stories (both humorous and serious) and present cases in a narrative way to engage with the students. This lets students get to know me and we build trust. This trust capital that I build enables me to offer very straight-forward feedback to my students – both positive and negative – without provoking the negative reaction that Palmer (2014) and van Ingen, et al. (2015) discuss. But I also work to choose examples that will appeal to students, ask them for examples, and we talk through things that are of interest to them in class. The single skill that I recommend any good instructor develop is impromptu speaking – being able to work with any topic that students can throw out and work that back to the key learning objectives in a class session.

Of course approaches to in-class engagement that work for me will not work for everyone and other people's approaches would not work for me, so there are two transferrable practices that I enact to create an entertaining and persuasive environment to support learning that I want to focus on. First, I create thoughtful, engaging, and well-polished class materials (ranging from PowerPoints to even the class look and feel) and thinking about the role that narrative plays in ensuring that information is both engaging and memorable. Specifically, each of my classes is 'branded' meaning that each has a distinctive and consistent visual look for all the materials from the syllabus to the PowerPoint slides. I have found that this helps to build the group's identity and to create the environment and mindset when they engage with the materials. Research already highlights the importance of brand identity within institutions of higher education (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009; Williams & Omar, 2014), I just apply that to the classes themselves.

Second, I try to make each class session an experience. In his analysis of why people attend rock concerts (stay with me here, I know that we are a long ways from being rock stars), Hopper (2014) found there were two main processes that created value for people attending a rock concert – co-creation of the experience and self-authentication. In the co-creation experience, ensuring that each class session has something memorable, interesting, and engaging not only improves attendance rates, but it also sets the tone for student openness. Frankly, it also makes teaching a lot more fun as well – so in focusing on a co-created and positive experience in each class session I create the conditions where students are more open to the concepts, the workload (and that is always high), and taking risks. This is reinforced by the self-authentication process where I create opportunities for students to consider how the day's lesson can be applied to their own interests and aspirations which lets them authenticate or take ownership of their own experience. In practical terms, I invite students to share their own examples, reflections, and create exercises where they can bring their own creativity to the session. My task is then to tie it all together and back into the learning objectives.

Applying These Lessons Broadly

All the professional reports and reflections on the state of higher education and communication education suggest that collectively we are not creating the environments for this generation of students to thrive and meet the expectations of a hypermodern world. In this paper I identify efficacy as not only a key part of the problem for Generations Y and Z, but also a critical component to improving learning outcomes and skill development for the field. I also suggest that if the field is to address both the needs of the industry and the students it must reconsider the approach to higher education to incorporate elements of entertainment, engagement to meet a universal design framework.

From this analysis a structure for creating a student-centered learning experience in our classes emerges (see Figure 1) that is transferrable across different classes and platforms for delivery. Before 2020 there had been a decade-long global expansion of online and blended learning opportunities, classes, and programs, but many academics could avoid engaging with these if they wanted. However, in a post-Covid-19 context many instructors now have to develop delivery for multi-platform environments, which means learning new tools and new approaches. My recommendation – after 20 years of traditional classroom experience and more than 10 years of online learning experience is that there is no need to re-invent the wheel; however, we do have to be more purposeful and mindful in our creation of an aligned student experience. Yet, by focusing on building efficacy and creating an engaging classroom environment we serve our students' interests more effectively.

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

Let me conclude with this thought – we have all given quizzes, both planned and pop-quizzes. I include weekly quizzes in my crisis communication class because I need to know the students have the foundational competence in the concepts and the materials before the simulations or the simulations will not meet the learning objectives (Avramenko, 2012). At the beginning of the semester I put my rationale to them directly telling them that the purpose of the quizzes is two fold – accountability for engaging with the material and ensuring they have the base knowledge to be competent practitioners. At the end of the semester, every semester, when they write their final reflections on the learning journey, several students acknowledge the usefulness of the quizzes and a couple will thank me for making them accountable. Because I build the self-efficacy, highlight the response efficacy, and create a valuable experience for them I am regularly thanked for giving them quizzes.

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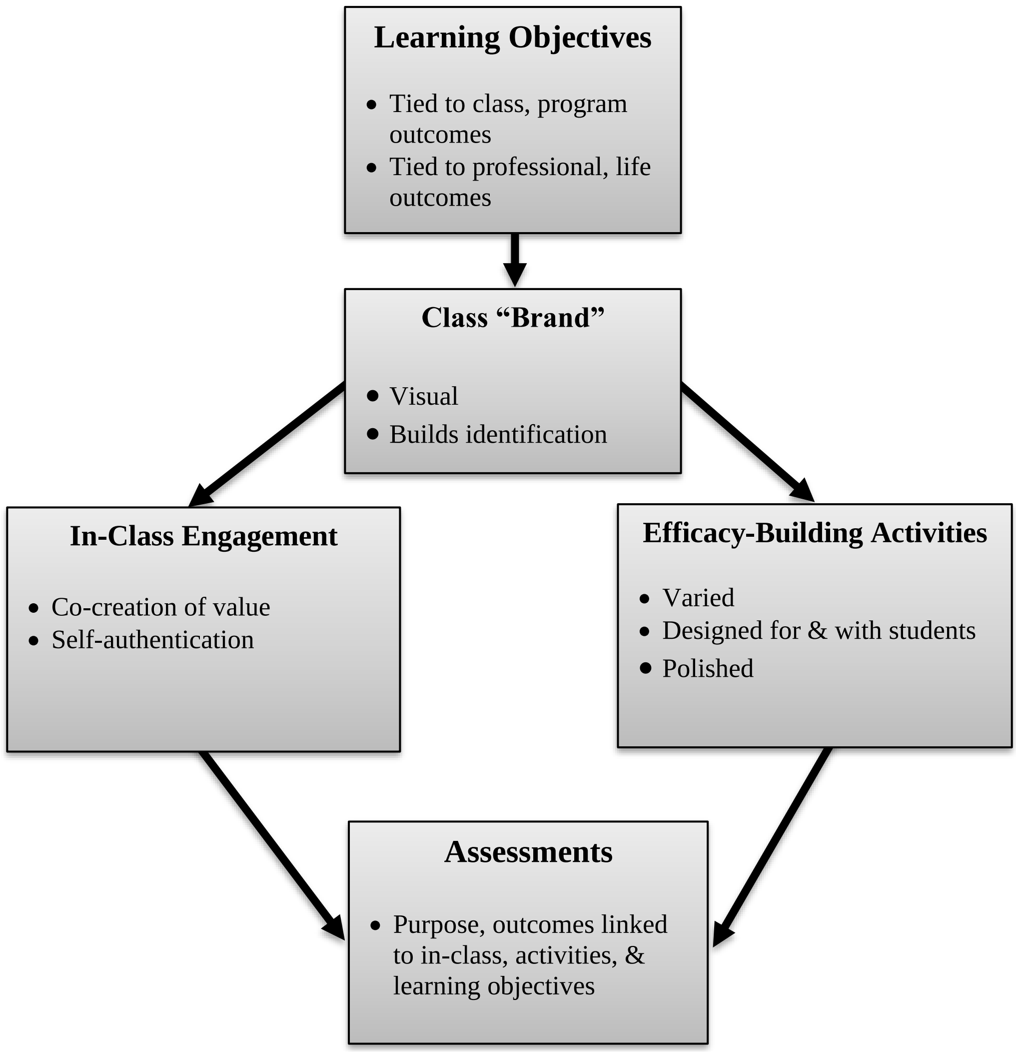

Figure 1: Building an Aligned Classroom