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Back to School

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A New Project

It is eleven at night and I am still building a Kahoot game. After more than thirty years running plants, nobody warned me that preparing a class takes almost as much time as teaching it.

As some of you may have noticed, my work situation changed recently and I joined a national university as a professor. At first I thought this would be an easy task since, after all, I have more than thirty years of work experience. I was wrong: being a teacher, even a part-time one, takes almost as much preparation time as standing in front of the classroom, or more. Even though the subject's topics are available on a platform where students can consult them, when I read them I find that some concepts could be explained in a different way, or that examples are needed to drive the point home. This is where my afternoons go now: searching for YouTube videos, creating interactive games, or reviewing the assignments my students submit so I can give them the fairest possible grade. And that is without mentioning all the courses I have to complete as part of the educational institution I now belong to: there is a series of trainings I must fulfill, from integrity courses to how to run my classes using the educational model the university requires, and even certifications in the R language. That is why the blog has been quieter than I would like; thank you to my few followers for your patience.

A New Mission

This is where I have lately been reflecting, first, on my role as a professor and leader of my students. Clearly, it is a completely different role from being the leader of a group of people dedicated to keeping a production process profitable. Now, my main mission as a leader is to get my students to demonstrate the competencies required by the subject I teach. That is why I invest time in preparing my classes beforehand and then in giving them useful feedback. But can I do more? How should I guide them to also develop their personalities, and not just their knowledge? Can this goal be achieved in blocks of two hours a day?

When I observe my students' behavior, I see that, even though they are professional-level students, their personalities are still taking shape and, with the exception of a few of them, most seem to be trying to figure out how to fit into the world. There are recognizable expressions of diversity, and my first task is to make sure they are respected, and to respect them myself. This is comparable to creating a safe environment in our workplace, a key step in getting people to participate freely in the exchange of ideas. Without respect there is no participation, in the classroom or on the production line.

In my groups I sadly observe that the ability to focus and pay attention is greatly diminished: I constantly catch them chatting among themselves, doing other tasks, or simply playing video games on their phones. The challenge of making sure they listen and understand seems unreachable. But I have identified something that does work: activities involving competition or play capture and hold their attention. Isn't that the same thing we do on the plant floor when we turn a goal into a scoreboard that everyone can see? So we have to sharpen our wits and adapt playful activities to formal concepts so that they are understood and internalized.

I also believe that teaching math, English or probability is not my only task. In my perception, many of them lack general knowledge: they know little about the historical events that affect how we live today and

few keep up with the news, which in part is understandable. But I believe the university's duty is to deliver qualified and aware professionals who assume their role as responsible members of society, and now I am part of the educational team in charge of this task.

Sowing Seeds of Leadership

That is why my task for the rest of the year is to sow as many seeds as I possibly can in the minds of my students. Certainly, engaging them, holding their attention and making it easier for them to learn the concepts is a big part of this task. Also, talking to them about respect, honesty and effort must have a place in our class sessions.

Still, in my head, I keep thinking that I can do more with them so that the personality traits that define a leader emerge and consolidate at the same time, so that we can contribute to a nation of leaders committed to Mexico and to their fellow citizens. I believe that, at the very least, I can instill in them the idea of what it takes to be a leader and begin guiding them to find their own voice and their own way of expressing their leadership. If I can contribute to that, even a little, I will consider it an achievement both personal and for the institution where I work.

Perhaps the question that matters equally in the classroom and on the plant floor is this: what are we sowing in the people we lead, beyond results?

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