

My Love/Hate Relationship With “Student Hat”: A Facilitation Journey

“Ok, it’s time to put your student hats on!” Whether sitting in a school cafeteria or ensconced in your favorite armchair with headphones and a business shirt paired with pajama bottoms, this phrase always brings plenty of emotion with it in a professional development session. My own student hat is well worn, I imagine it to be a knit beanie, a nice faded shade of blue, reminiscent of a South Park character; born and raised in Colorado during the ’80s and ’90s, this hat just feels right. Sometimes however, the knit feels itchy, uncomfortable, constricting and let’s be honest, I never really watched South Park and I’m a veteran teacher turned professional development (PD) provider in my own right. This past year, I’ve had the time and space to dig into best practices around PD design and delivery and a theme has emerged; I love the “student hat”, but I also hate it.

A great student hat experience:

Rewind the clock to summer 2014, I am sitting in a small conference room buzzing with energy and nerdy high school biology teachers. These teachers run the gamut of experience, anywhere from first-year to 20-year veterans, and come from all over the country. Though they all have something in common that I don’t, they are current AP Biology teachers. I am an aspiring AP Biology teacher. I’m trying to lay the groundwork for my ultimate career goal, but I haven’t made it yet and I definitely feel like an interloper, a pretender, and way out of my depth in terms of content knowledge. When the facilitator announces it’s time to assume a learner perspective, that hat slides on nice and easy and provides me a safe space where I can ask questions and “pretend” like I don’t know because I’m a “student,” even if my questions are truly my own.

The facilitators were masters of their craft. I felt challenged, supported, and pushed to think deeply about content, pedagogy, and the connection between the two. We were asked to be metacognitive about our metacognition and I clearly remember one perfect moment where the layers were peeled away and I realized how this inception-like magic had been planned for, and whoa, I could plan the same type of experiences for my students?! It was truly transformational PD; I rewrote the rest of my curriculum for the remainder of the year and have tried to incorporate elements of this type of design into my classroom ever since. *That* student hat experience was essential.

A not-so-great student hat experience:

“Ok class! WELCOME, it is SO GOOD to see your bright shiny sixth-grade faces! Aren’t you just the most WONDERFUL sixth graders I’ve EVER seen! Let’s all take a minute to think about clouds! What have YOU heard about clouds?! Ooooh, yes, I’d love to hear your thoughts! Precipitation?? Hmm, that seems like an awfully big word for a SIXTH GRADER . . . does anyone else have thoughts?”

Screech! Fingernails on a chalkboard, a car alarm going off at 3 a.m., sitting on the tarmac as they try to “fix a mechanical problem.” I am outta here, take this ridiculous student hat off! I still wriggle in discomfort thinking about this type of student hat experience. The type where we role play, the facilitator gets a bit too excited about treating me like a little kid, and apparently thinks all sixth graders (or let’s be honest, freshmen get this treatment too) are complete and utter fools who should have no prior knowledge about anything. Humph.

I think this happens for a few reasons. First, the facilitator is truly trying to help the participants get out of their own head space and give their student hat a try. I don’t for a minute think the facilitator starts out rubbing their hands together in excitement saying, “Oh yay, today I get to treat adults like they know nothing at all, yippee!” Second, clumsy attempts at trying to make sure participants stay in student hat (a sixth grader wouldn’t know the word precipitation) are likely good faith efforts at trying to push the thinking of participants, to help them anticipate real student responses and challenge those participants who have a hard time setting aside their expert content knowledge. Lastly, sometimes it’s been a while since a facilitator was in a classroom with real students, and it’s easy to forget what actual kids are like. Part of the outrage I feel in this type of student hat experience is righteous indignation on behalf of precocious preteens who most certainly know a lot about random topics, including the water cycle. Needless to say, whatever the reasons are behind when a student hat experience goes south, I shut down, I get cranky, and I might even get a little snarky and subversive purposefully getting my small group off task and complaining/commiserating about the facilitator. Is this starting to sound like a precocious preteen?

Something I learned from my own facilitation this year:

For the past year, I’ve been working as a Program Fellow for the **Knowles**

Teacher Initiative. In that role, I've had a chance to plan and facilitate a few PD sessions, and again the tension between student hat and learning surfaced during one of the tasks we used at our Spring 2023 Fellow Meeting. The task was awesome. It's called the hand boiler task and uses [this device](#). If you haven't done it with your own students, I highly recommend it (maybe for a great first week of school inquiry activity or for your gas laws unit). The trouble was, some of the teachers in the room *had* done it already with their own students. We framed the task by asking participants to put on their student hats, and not take away someone's aha moment by "answering the question" or explaining the phenomenon. We wanted to allow others the chance to struggle and to experience the task as a learner. Ultimately though, we realized those who had done it before and were trying hard to stay in student hat were actually denying themselves learning opportunities. They ended up taking a backseat in their groups, or their group mates were hesitant to ask them for evidence to support their claims because everyone just assumed that they knew what was going on because they'd done it before. After debriefing with some of the other facilitators, we realized, perhaps we were unintentionally setting up the participants to enter a **task completion stance**, instead of a **learner stance**.

A task completion stance highlights the finished product. When this stance is operating, one might expect to hear comments such as "Let's get it done," or "Let's push through this," or "Check. What's next?" A learning stance, in contrast, inflects the group's activity with an emphasis on asking questions, seeking explanations, trying out possible solutions, and so on. When a learning stance is operating, we expect to hear questions such as "What do we need to understand in order to carry out this task?" or "What are some other possible explanations for . . . ?" or "What's your evidence for . . . ?" (Allen and Blythe, 2015, p. 13-15)

Perhaps the process of explaining what they knew about the hand boiler to their groups would have surfaced lingering misconceptions or questions they themselves had. Maybe those groups would have had a chance to create a more detailed model of the phenomenon, and in doing so, illuminated a key science idea that no other groups came up with, therefore moving the whole class's thinking forward . . . and now I'm totally thinking about teaching a room of sixth or ninth graders with those eager students who have so much background knowledge and how it's always hard to navigate them "ruining the surprise" for everyone else. The process of engaging in a task as your authentic self with a learner stance

means there will always be something to learn, even if you are already an expert in the content. The point isn't to just complete the task, the point is also to understand the types of questions you can ask about a given task, to figure out the access points that students will have for the task, to anticipate misconceptions, to think about the science ideas that are present in the task and how to help students recognize that they are learning content by struggling to figure out this really neat thing—I could go on.

What I want to remember going forward:

All of this ultimately leads back to thinking about the needs of adult learners. This year, I've been reading *The PD Book* by Elena Aguilar and Lori Cohen and I've found the [Principles of Adult Learning](#) to be especially helpful as I'm muddling through. Next year, I will enter a new phase of my career where I will be planning for and delivering professional development to teachers with a variety of experiences. They might never have had to use a student hat. A few of those principles stand out to me and are things I want to keep in mind:

1. **Adults need to feel safe to learn:** In the student hat context, this means that all the expertise of the participant needs to be honored and respected. I'm not going to use a sing-songy voice, and I'm going to speak to each participant **as an adult**, even if we are in student hat.
2. **Adults want to learn:** One of the most powerful things about the way science teaching and learning is happening now is modeling. I would wager that even the most knowledgeable teacher comes to a place where they have questions about their model of a given phenomenon. Teachers can be in a **learner hat** without having to assume the identity of a sixth grader. When it's time to think through how you would teach a task in your own classroom, then you can more fully consider from your own students' perspective what ideas/questions/misconceptions might arise. I would wager that constantly interrupting participants to remind them that "a sixth grader wouldn't know that" actually serves to take them out of the learner role completely and just

focus on trying to do student hat the *right way*.

3. Adults need to know why we have to learn something: In most of the sessions I've been in where we've used student hat, the reasons why have been relatively well framed. I've always understood why we were going to put on those hats. When I facilitate I'm going to (I think) make sure that I include my own spin on it, which is the learner hat. Even in the case of a teacher who has already taught the task before in their own classroom, asking them to pretend like they haven't and not give away "the answer" doesn't sit right with me. I would rather they have to justify their understanding to the rest of their small group. I would rather the rest of the group challenge the thinking of that person and really push them to fully explain their thinking, which may just help that teacher realize any gaps that exist in their own understanding. Of course, this would need to be paired with time to reflect on what students would know and understand and how they would engage with the task, which is super valuable, and I think just as or more powerful when done in teacher hat anyway.

I anticipate my relationship with student hat and learner stance will continue to evolve. I can guarantee I will have failures as a facilitator, and hopefully some wins, on my quest to improve my facilitation skills. What has been your experience in student hat? How do you approach this delicate dance as a facilitator? As planning gets underway for the '23-'24 school year, I'd love to continue this conversation with you! I hope you had a great summer with time to reflect on how to best use those somewhat battered yet beloved beanies, ball caps, bowlers, boaters, buckets and berets.

Reference

Allen, D. & Blythe, T. (2015). *Facilitating for Learning: Tools for Teacher Groups of All Kinds*. Teachers College Press.

