

GERRY WASS ON MULTI-LEVEL CLASSES



Our friend and colleague Gerry Wass is now retired from full time teaching. Here is a shot of his experience and wisdom gained on the front lines as a classroom teacher for many years.=. Hopefully with more time on his hands he will be able to write many more pieces like this.

Gerry Wass was a teacher in the Purdy School District in southwest Missouri, with students in grades 6-12. He taught multi-level Spanish classes for four years and his Spanish Club members ran the Purdy Recycling Project, an industrial recycling that collected more than a million pounds of materials in ten years of operation. Gerry has retired from teaching but he is active in his region, mentoring teachers and helping schools to improve foreign language programs. His passions are agriculture and of course, learning languages.

A Blueprint for Multi-Level Classrooms

After listening to Blaine Ray talk about the possibilities offered by using TPRS® in multi-level classes, I began teaching them four years ago. I found the challenge compelling, even though I dreaded the complexity of meeting the needs of students at different levels. A few others who had tried it gave me encouragement, but it was finally fear for my own classroom numbers that pushed me to begin: it seemed like another class was always in the way of my schedule. I had little idea how to do this, and I have had plenty of struggles, but Blaine was right about the potential, so I hope this piece will offer a blueprint for adopting this idea, and with less difficulty than I have had.

In each of my three Spanish classes I have levels one through four plus native speakers. Since beginning this project, I have discovered that there are other teachers running multi-level classes. They seem to be largely combinations of upper-level students—surely a useful strategy—but I see more potential power when all levels are combined. So ***I propose to define a multi-level class as containing all possible proficiency levels***; I would call other models “combined-level” classes, only because I see so much strength in the complete multi-level model that I want to distinguish between the two.

I recently discovered that a colleague in a nearby district has begun teaching multi-level classes. In trying to help him, I have made a simple but powerful discovery: other teachers who attempt multi-level classes *are probably explicitly differentiating between different levels within their classes*; they create different lessons for different levels in a ‘one-room schoolhouse’ model. I also had believed such differentiation would be necessary, and feared not being organized or skilled enough to do so.

After my first year of teaching this way, I was fortunate enough to be able to explain how much fun I was having to Stephen Krashen, at the National TPRS conference in Dallas. When he said “How are you differentiating for your upper-level students?” I could only say “I don’t know,” which was not helpful to either of us. I knew that my students were learning more with multi-levels, but how and why continued to elude me. I now know that I do differentiate by employing my more skillful students in various ways, but I do not plan separate lessons for them. I have actually tried doing that, sending them out for another assignment when I thought they would be bored, but they rebelled and asked to remain in the class. “We like the energy of the class and we want to be here,” said one.

I have discussed this model with my students, and they have always enthusiastically supported it. I finally understand why I like it so much and why it works: ***It is because I do not plan to differentiate; there is only one lesson plan for each of my three classes.*** Each day is a series of whole-class activities that sweep everyone up together. It is not perfect, and there have to be moments of boredom for upper students, but somewhere in the 2nd or 3rd years they will begin starting small conversations with me, and by the 4th, they are speaking extensively, generally being more vocal in class than my native speakers. They benefit from the yearly cycle of repetition, and more of my energy goes into adopting and adapting new ideas from colleagues. There is less pressure on me to make sure that they get enough reps of everything in the first year, and there is a large amount of helping going on; my lower-level students look up to those who have come before. I have built a better sense of classroom community by keeping them together, and I could not have found time to develop separate, compelling, personalized lessons for advanced students.

So, why should anyone, or any school district attempt to combine all their class levels together?

I work in a rural K-12 school system, and flexibility is always needed, so I have two classes in other languages for middle-school students. If I were not also running a community service program, I would have space to take on another multi-level high-school class in another language. It is far easier for students to schedule classes in a system where every class is open to students of all levels. *Small schools have the most immediate benefit to gain from adopting the multi-level class model*, because one teacher can reach across so many age levels.

The multi-level model has pushed me to see my students as more than future bilingual citizens, and I am now teaching (at least in introductory fashion) seven different languages in this tiny Missouri community, igniting a passion for language most deeply in my younger students who are studying five of those. We talk a lot about what it would mean to become a polyglot speaking three or more languages, and they are quite infected with that idea. Small schools that utilize TPRS can step into this linguistic vision with all the intellectual force that it could provide.

I could not imagine doing multi-level classes without TPRS and the way it creates community, and just as much, I can no longer imagine doing TPRS without multi-level classes. If many stories change every year, or even if we just tell them better as we grow, students will benefit. Multi-level classes generate more moments in which we just visit with

our students in the target language, because we have more students capable of carrying on conversations.

In a multi-level class, harder jobs can be directed to students who have more experience, and they need those jobs more to stay alert during the reviewing they experience. Upper-level students can help the teacher stay in the target language by acting as translators, and they are great for writing on the board. They are also capable of teaching for short periods, and it is powerful to watch them deal with the power and fear that involves. In such moments I see their social and emotional intelligence growing alongside their intellect.

If I had understood the benefits, I would have begun this much earlier in my career and I might have taken it to more skilled levels; I have insights about how to improve at least several times each week. *I have become a better teacher by teaching multi-level classes.* I have found the personal space to learn more and more of the TPRS[®] skill set and now have grown to where I am advising other teachers how to get started without the many failures I have experienced.

I really thought that I was doing something wrong by not creating a different set of activities for upper levels, but I couldn't figure out how, and I had a lot of fun with the whole group. I would have had a clearer path fewer difficulties if I had understood, from the beginning, the wisdom of addressing the needs of all within the framework of only one class lesson. This model has given me cover for not being a skilled storyteller; I could detail many separate skills that I still struggle with, and yet it works.

I do have one other key tool: *I have a Mindset classroom where we talk about the Learner Path and the Judger Path.* I rarely have to contend with students being unkind to each other because of this framework, and I would not attempt this work without that overlay.

I understand that like so many other methods, it is difficult to imagine this without actually observing, but I feel very deeply that multi-level classes are superior to grouping students by either year or level of proficiency. The ultimate reason may have to do with this: *the endpoint of all passionate language study is social.* We all want to speak our thrilling new language and we long for a supportive community where wise people will help us. A multi-level classroom has more of those wise people