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Philosophy of Teaching and Learning

This paper describes some of my thoughts on the nature of learning and the role and responsibilities of teachers in the learning process. Basically, I believe that an eclectic approach to teaching that focuses on the goals of education and the students' needs is the best approach for teachers to take. Teachers are not the center of the learning process, they are just assistants. The learner is the center of the learning process and everything about that process should be devised and oriented toward getting the learner to move himself or herself toward the goal.

Learners acquire learning through interaction with the material in various situations. Reading is interaction with text. Discussions are interactions between people. Some forms of interaction are more effective than others but effectiveness is influenced by personal factors – learning styles, motivation, meta-cognitive awareness, prior knowledge, and culture, to name a few. Thus, the effectiveness of a given interaction will vary between learners.

I am not a fan of the description “teacher” because it implies that a teacher's responsibility is to impart knowledge or cause a student to know something. This is not incorrect, but I believe that it focuses too strongly on the teacher acting on the learner, which turns the learner into a passive recipient of the teacher's knowledge. Instead, the teacher's role is to facilitate the learners' acquisition of the learning. Learners in turn must take responsibility for their learning. Learning is an active process and only the learner can do it.

Taking responsibility for learning also creates ownership of the learning – “I did it. It is mine.”. The teacher, as mentioned, just facilitates the learners learning.

By “facilitate” I mean to ease and accelerate acquisition. As an over-simplified example, suppose that I can learn to speak Spanish to some defined level of competence in seven days by sitting in my room listening to CDs and reading a textbook. If a teacher cannot help me get to the same level of competence more easily and in a shorter time, he or she is not really helping me and is not a teacher.

As mentioned above, students must also take responsibility for their own learning and teachers must encourage this through their teaching styles. Spoon-feeding is for infants, not classrooms. A teaching style can resemble spoon-feeding when the teacher provides the knowledge and the students are expected to ingest it (and later regurgitate it on a test). Aside from being a colossal waste of everyone's time, such “teaching” does nothing to encourage acquisition, much less ownership, of the learning by the learner.

In order to assist learners most effectively, a teacher must understand each student as an individual and be able to assist in the ways best suited for each learner. This may sound terribly difficult, but even though every student is an individual, there is plenty of overlap in both students' learning styles and preferences as well as in classroom activities. Tailoring a variety of activities and strategies for the students should facilitate learning for most of a class without herculean effort. The teacher will only have to spend a lot of time on a handful of students.

I have been intentionally vague about the object of learning, calling it just “learning” because it is a complicated concept. Content area knowledge – the facts, theories, processes, etc. of a subject are one goal. Usually knowing facts just as facts is not enough and it is better

for learners to understand at a higher level. How are facts known? How are theories arrived at? Why are processes used as they are? These are examples of going beyond facts to knowing about the facts and about the relationships between them. Again though, this is not the ultimate goal of education or learning, especially in the public education context. A higher goal exists: the ability to think critically, to form hypotheses and test them, to deconstruct an argument and form your own, and similar cognitive skills. This active and creative use of skills and knowledge is acquired through a series of stages, more or less as described above. At this level, knowledge merges with art and mastery is achieved.

I like to use a sports analogy to explain the above stages of knowing. A novice basketball player cannot just go out on the court during a game and be anything other than in the way. Beginners in most sports spend many hours drilling and practicing. Hours learning to dribble so that it is totally automatic. Learning how to pass the ball and how to shoot. Dribbling and passing are not the goal of learning basketball. They are important of course – without them you cannot play basketball – but they are just the prerequisites for going on to the next level, which is to practice playing. At this level the learner practices many new skills, using and building on the skills acquired at the previous level. However, these skills are still not the goal of basketball. There are several levels, each of which builds on the previous ones, and the ultimate goal is to be able to play basketball on a team knowledgeably and competently, fully understanding and being able to implement all the plays, as well as when one is better than another and why it is, in a given situation.

In learning, each stage or level does not need to be 100% mastered before moving to the next. That would be boring and counter-productive, if it were even possible to do. Rather, the learner must have enough of a base at the current level so that the next level can be

accomplished. A sort of $i+1$, for general learning. To advance, the learner must be challenged to go beyond what he or she has already achieved. In this example, i is what the learner can do or understand, and $+1$ is the element of challenge that the learner needs to overcome in order to advance. In basketball, i is perhaps dribbling and shooting and $+1$ is playing in a practice game. In that game, the player uses dribbling and shooting to do more than just dribble and shoot. By doing more, he or she achieves more and adds to his or her mastery of previously learned skills.

Obviously content area learning is not the same as learning basketball. One of the bigger holes in the analogy may be that while some athletic skills may transfer to other sports, most do not, or not directly at least. Throwing a basketball and throwing a baseball are not very similar. In contrast, the skills built up at each level of education (if not the specific facts) often do transfer to other content areas. Analyzing an argument critically is similar whether the argument concerns biology, math, or literature. Meta-cognitive skills and learning strategies are directly transferable from any topic to any other. If I know how to apply reading strategies and am familiar with mnemonics, I will be able to apply these strategies to readings in particle physics just as well as to readings in ancient Chinese literature. It is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that learners know about and can successfully apply meta-cognitive strategies.

Critical thinking and the other goals of education are all worthwhile but we can still ask why they are important. Why should learners at public schools in the USA acquire these skills instead of mastering a musical instrument or another language? A common answer to this question is that the ability to think critically is absolutely necessary for a citizen to participate effectively in a democracy. Thus, the ultimate goal of education is a political one.

Because it is political in origin, the goal of education will vary by culture, country, and time period. Each country and culture will likely have different political goals for its education systems. Currently for example, it is not unreasonable to suppose that China's goals for its educational system are different in many respects from the goals of the system in the USA and that these differences often stem from differences in the political systems of the two countries and their cultures.

Personally, I believe, from years of first-hand experience, that the goals of Japan's educational system are similar to America's but still differ culturally in many important respects. For example, while literacy and education in general are highly valued both socially and culturally in Japan, the skills of critical thinking and self-expression are much less valued by the Japanese educational system and Japanese society. They are certainly not high priority goals for the schools. I say this based on the minuscule amount of research and analytical writing that students do through the high school level compared with the amount of rote-learning the same students do in class. So although America and Japan are both industrialized democracies, culturally they have different approaches to education and its goals.

The fact that the ultimate goals of education are political brings up a simple question however: what about non-citizens? This is not a trivial question for me because I intend to work in the ESL (English as a Second Language) field, where it is likely that many of my students will not be citizens of the USA. The question can be stated even more broadly however: who deserves an education?

Everyone. Everyone is entitled to an equitable education as a basic human right. While this raises questions concerning the political nature of educational goals, it also brings up the more weighty topic of responsibilities. Education is a human right and that places a great

responsibility on teachers, schools, boards of education, etc. right up to the members of national and international education-related bodies. Unfortunately, despite being the professionals actually in the classrooms with the students, teachers often get the short end of that very long stick. Lack of funding, understanding, and support are not uncommon in the education world but these should not be used to excuse poor learner achievement or inappropriate teaching strategies.

Teachers have a responsibility to help their students – every one of their students – acquire the skills and tools that they need to make of themselves what they want, not what is left for them to become. On no one else does this responsibility fall so heavily. Looked at in this way, teaching as an occupation is more similar to a career in the armed forces than it is to a career in the business world. While a teacher's failure may not literally cost a life, it can certainly be a cause in a learner's failure to realize his or her potential fully.

I said above that no one has more responsibility than teachers for student learning. What about parents? Don't they have ultimate responsibility? Not in my classroom, no, they do not. In my school, in my classroom, I am responsible for my students' achievement. Of course being a parent is a huge responsibility but does society hold the parents responsible if a doctor fails to properly treat a young patient? Of course not, so why should parents shoulder more responsibility than teachers for a student's learning? The teacher is the professional, the one with the training, the one facilitating the student's learning.

Responsibility does not end with the teacher. Obviously it is better for the learner if the parents are as involved as possible with their child's education. However, as an ESL teacher the reality is often going to be that the parents or guardians of my students will be too busy trying

to earn a living, and to learn English themselves, to be as involved as they might like to be in their child's education.

My outlook is more positive than the above may sound. Yes, there are challenges in being an educator. Overcoming challenges is what makes the effort worthwhile and what makes us better teachers. By assisting student learning and encouraging the ownership of learning, teachers do not just avoid failure, they succeed in their teaching, their students succeed in their learning, and both are situated for success in their lives.