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A CONCEPTION OF EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

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A great portion of our human and financial resources has been invested in the mission of teaching the children and youth of America. Despite this effort, many still lack understanding about the fundamental nature of excellence in teaching. A perusal of the literature will convince one that very little theory undergirds research on teaching. In one review of research on behavior in teaching, Brophy admits that "most of this research is heavily empirical, guided by no systematic theory and, in fact, very little theory at all."[1] This lack of theoretical knowledge affects our attempts to improve instruction. As indicated by Travers, "There is no single concept of what the teacher should be undertaking in the classroom."[2] Consequently, each teacher has his or her own conception of teaching, however inconsistent and implicit it might be.

Green explains that a conception is a rule: "When someone learns a concept, without exception, what he has learned is a rule, a rule of language, or more generally, a rule of behavior."[3] Hyman notes the implications of this for teaching when he states that "a person setting out to teach needs to clarify his concept of teaching because the concept he holds directly influences the activities he will engage in."[4]

Clarifying a conception of teaching (and excellence in teaching) is not necessary only for each teacher, but it is also critical for those who evaluate and do research on teaching. How can teaching be evaluated or studied unless specific factors are identified for investigation? A conception of teaching, and more important, a conception of excellence in teaching, should elucidate these essential elements. This article will attempt to shed light on both of these concepts.

What Is Teaching?

The word *teach* is used in a variety of contexts. In the broadest sense it may refer to an occupation with its attendant institutional activities (e.g., attending meetings, taking roll, patrolling hallways, etc.). Our concern will be the use of this word in a more narrow sense as it pertains to the act of teaching

(e.g., questioning, motivating, testing, explaining, etc.). Some teaching activities and concerns are "context-specific," that is, they are more relevant for specific age groups, specific ability levels, or specific subject matter.[5] The focus of this study will be on those teaching activities and concerns that constitute teaching in general, regardless of such contextual factors.

A dominant model for research on teaching continues to be the process-product approach in which a specific set of teacher competencies can be dependably linked to student achievement.[6] The weakness of this model is that it assumes a simple, linear, cause-effect relationship between teaching and learning. Dunkin and Biddle, in their approach to studying classroom teaching, have identified at least eight classes of variables, besides that of the teacher's behavior, that should be studied for influence on student learning.[7] Of these variables, three deal solely with the student, involving the student's characteristics and classroom behavior. Thus, it becomes evident that a number of factors influence student learning, and *one* of these factors is teaching.

Little attention has been directed to the notion of student responsibility for learning. It has been largely assumed in our tendency toward an efficient, mechanistic approach to education that "since behavior is controlled by the environment, the pupils cannot be held responsible for whether they do or do not learn. If the classroom manager provides favorable conditions for learning, then the pupil will learn. If the pupil does not learn, then the conditions provided by the teacher must be blamed."[8] However, one important student characteristic that must be considered is the disposition of the student, especially the student's receptivity to teaching. Even the great teachers, Socrates and Jesus, experienced strong opposition from some of those they taught. Can we expect complete responsiveness from our students?

At this point it will prove helpful to make a decision between teaching as intention and teaching as achievement.[9] In teaching as achievement, a direct, causal relationship exists between teaching and learning. Yet this disregards what is commonly experienced, that teaching may occur without learning. Although, in many cases, teaching may be considered a necessary condition for learning, it is not a sufficient condition. For this reason, Magee suggests that we view the word *teaching* as a task word and not an achievement word. Of course, there must be some relationship to achievement since words develop a "task" sense only when they often result in achievement. In sum, it can be said that teaching *intends* to bring about learning in students, but sometimes it may not be successful.

Current emphasis on the information-processing model of cognitive learning has brought to light the importance of an active and meaningful involvement on the part of the student during the learning process. Psychologists such as Ausubel and Anderson, as well as Piaget and Inhelder, have suggested that a student's cognitive structures play an important role as ideational anchors.[10] By interacting with the environment, students build

and adjust their schemata, and thus personally construct their own knowledge and experience. If students have not formed relevant schema, they may be incapable of learning, or they may be impaired in fully comprehending specific information.

The creation of the taxonomies for the cognitive and affective domains has clarified a variety of levels of learning. It is conceivable that a higher level of learning may not be realistic for some students whose learning abilities have been arrested at lower levels through a conditioning process of only experiencing lower level teaching, or possibly because of a lack of initiative, or for other reasons. Thus, in assessing the effectiveness of teaching, we should also consider the factor of the level of content that is taught and learned. At what level of learning is the teaching aimed? At what level is the student learning?

Students not only learn through what the teacher says, but also through what the teacher does. Another emphasis in learning theory relates to observational-social learning.[11] As McLuhan has popularly stated, the medium is the message. Both the modeling the teacher does, and the environment of schooling, may either complement the intended message, or contradict it and hinder learning. Although the teacher is partly responsible here, a host of variables influence student learning—variables that are institutional and societal—beyond any teacher's direct control.

What has been described, then, is that many more factors affect student learning than just teaching. They include: (a) the entry characteristics of students, especially receptivity to teaching, (b) the meaningfulness and level of learning, and (c) the harmony or consistency between the teaching and the social context of the educational setting. Thus, teaching should not be viewed in a purely cause-effect association with learning. Then how should teaching be viewed in relationship to the teacher, the student, and student learning? It is suggested that teaching is an intentional activity in which a teacher, by word and deed, and in conjunction with (and sometimes in spite of) the circumstances of the educational setting, directs the opportunity for students to involve themselves actively and meaningfully in personally constructing their own knowledge and experience of a particular subject.

Toward Excellence in Teaching

With this conception of teaching as a general framework, a discussion of excellence in teaching can proceed. To provide a framework for this inquiry, the following commonplaces of teaching will be utilized: (a) the teacher, (b) the student, (c) the aims of teaching, (d) the activities of teaching, and (e) the outcomes of teaching. Within these broad categories, eleven variables are identified as elements that constitute excellence in teaching. Each of the eleven elements is presented and briefly discussed in the following section.

The teacher

Lifestyle of the teacher. Because of the implications of observational-social learning, an assessment of excellent teaching must consider the teacher's lifestyle. Are the aims taught exemplified by the teacher? The popular concept of "master teachers" bears out this emphasis on his personal life. Those who have given testimony to their great teachers have recalled how these master teachers[12] were consumed by their particular subject, as well as by their desire to teach students how to think. These teachers were great thinkers themselves who strongly urged students to think critically. Socrates exemplified a life devoted to seeking truth, to living virtuously, and to producing a state of discomfiture for those who claimed to know truth. Jesus manifested the holiest life of all, preaching and living the truth. Jersild indicates that only teachers who are themselves moving toward self-actualization are in a position to guide this process in others.[13] Thus, excellent teaching is not solely confined to the classroom, but is rather a habit, a way of life.

Mastery of the subject matter. This achievement by the teacher will affect his ability to teach excellently. Subject matter may be conceived either as isolated, or in relationship to other disciplines. It may be viewed as a group of facts (content), or as both content and process (the skills requisite for gathering and interpreting the facts of the subject). Subject matter may also be mastered at a variety of levels (whether it be a part of the cognitive or affective taxonomies).

The student

Student responsibility for learning. In the past, this may have been considered a given, but today the obligation of the student to put forth his best effort can no longer be assumed. With what disposition does he enter the teaching-learning milieu? What degree of receptivity to teaching is there? Are the student's psychological and emotional needs so great as to incapacitate any learning, no matter who the teacher is? Has the student made a decision to commit himself or herself to participate in learning the subject matter? This aspect of cooperation between teacher and student may be similar to that of a marriage where both partners bring a determined resolve to invest themselves in the marriage relationship. Such a high degree of partnership may be possible with only a few students.

The aims of teaching

Worthiness of the teaching aims. Of the utmost importance in education is the selection of constructive and worthy aims. Effectively teaching someone how to steal or kill may receive high marks on a process-product evaluation form, but it will promote neither social progress and the advancement of civilization, nor the good for the individual and for society. Socrates confronted his listeners with questions pertaining to fundamental reality. Jesus

directed His audience to decide about their participation and commitment to the kingdom of God. Jersild and Rogers both suggest that teaching should be aimed at aiding the student in attaining self-actualization.[14]

The criteria one selects to judge the worthiness of aims will reflect a view of life, education, and mankind. Worthy aims promote emotional, moral, and social, as well as cognitive growth. Teaching should aim at encouraging students to perceive and live out the implications of their own knowledge and convictions. Worthy aims allow students the opportunity to wrestle with issues at higher levels of learning, both in the cognitive and affective realms.

The activities of teaching

Teaching preparation. Jackson has made a useful distinction when he identifies "preactive" teaching as those activities the teacher usually does alone (for example, lesson planning, reading, creative thinking, arranging classroom furniture), and "interactive" teaching as the aspect of teaching involving both student and teacher.[15] Many qualitative efforts of thinking, studying, planning, and organizing are invested in excellent teaching.

Use of students' intelligence. To what degree does the teacher allow an open and rational discussion of the matter at hand? Green designed a continuum in which teaching activities were related to their use of students' intelligence.[16] Activities such as conditioning and indoctrinating that do not encourage the students to use their intelligence were not considered true teaching. True teaching should reflect a view of the student as capable of critical thinking and self-direction, and not as an animal to be manipulated or as a dupe to be brainwashed.

Classroom working relationships. Thelen entitled this factor "productivity."[17] It relates to the supportive, social cooperation that is fostered—the kind of working relationships promoted by the teacher. Student activities may be cooperative, parallel, or competitive. What does the teacher do to encourage a mutual cooperative effort by the students, all the while incorporating their diverse abilities and interests? How does the teacher station himself or herself: on a pedestal, behind a barrier, or as a friend and partner in the quest of learning? Is there a continuity between the teacher's relationship with students in and out of class? By means of the relationship a teacher establishes with students, the teacher reflects his or her views of the learner and the learning process.

Opportunity for meaningful learning. To what degree does the teacher provide the opportunity for the student to be actively involved in the learning process? This need not necessarily be physical activity. A teacher may be able to stimulate student mental activity that can be very important.[18] Regardless of whether it is mainly mental activity of a student listening to a lecture, or more active participation in a group discussion, are students challenged to construct personally their own knowledge and experience, or are they directed only to regurgitate the teacher's or textbook's knowledge?

Does the teacher foster the development and refinement of cognitive structures through activities such as advanced organizers, puzzling dilemmas, or perceptive questions? The teacher should encourage the student to learn at higher levels of conceptual and experiential learning.

Knowledge of student needs. How well does the teacher heed student feedback (both verbal and nonverbal) during the interactive aspect of teaching? Is the teacher capable of making adjustments in the lesson plan when student needs would suggest a different teaching approach? Does each student have a clear understanding of his or her specific responsibilities for participation? Because of the differences in the ability and disposition of students, there may be a need to have differing aims for differing groups of students. An excellent teacher is sensitive to and takes into consideration the needs of the students.

Commitment to pursuing excellence in teaching. With regard to the teacher's lifestyle, preparation, and interaction with students, is the teacher committed to the pursuit of excellence? Would the teacher rate his or her own efforts of teaching at the 100 percent level? 75 percent? 50 percent? Does the teacher pursue excellence consistently, or only infrequently?

The outcomes of teaching

Effect of student learning. Though teaching does not guarantee learning, a close relationship exists between the two. As mentioned earlier, a number of factors may influence learning in students, and one of these factors is teaching. A variety of unobtrusive measures may be used in tandem with, or instead of, obtrusive measures for gauging student learning. Consideration should be given for both short- and long-term effects, and learning in the affective realm as well as the cognitive and psychomotor realms. Since teaching intends to bring about learning, we should expect learning—but learning of what quality and duration, and in how many students?

Conclusion

How one views teaching significantly affects how one practices teaching. The process-product orientation to teaching presumes too much of a causal relation between teaching and learning, and therefore requires a greater degree of accountability from the teacher than is realistic and necessary. A more circumscribed conception of teaching is offered as the basis for an inquiry into excellence in teaching. The eleven factors identified as essential may prove useful as a suggestive guide for the evaluation and improvement of instruction.

Different questions still remain. To what degree need each of these variables be in evidence to fully constitute excellence in teaching? And in what proportion should each of these variables be manifested? Further study will be required to deal with these issues.

Notes

[1] J. E. Brophy, "Teacher Behavior and Its Effects," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 71 (1979): 738.

[2] R. W. Travers, "Criteria of Good Teaching," *Handbook of Teacher Evaluation* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1981): 22.

[3] T. F. Green, "A Topology of the Teaching Concept," *Contemporary Thought on Teaching* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971): 71.

[4] R. T. Hyman, *Ways of Teaching* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1974): 35.

[5] N. L. Gage, "The Generality of Dimensions of Teaching," *Research on Teaching: Concepts, Findings, and Implications* (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Publishing Corp., 1979).

[6] D. M. Medley, "The Effectiveness of Teachers," *Research on Teaching: Concepts, Findings, and Implications* (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Publishing Corp., 1979). Also see W. Doyle, "Paradigms for Research on Teacher Effectiveness," *Review of Research in Education* 5 (1977): 163-79.

[7] M. J. Dunkin and B. J. Biddle, *The Study of Teaching* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974).

[8] Travers, *op. cit.*, 17.

[9] J. B. Magee, *Philosophical Analysis in Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

[10] D. Ausubel, *The Psychology of Meaningful Verbal Learning* (New York: Grune & Stratten, 1963). Also see R. C. Anderson, R. J. Spiro, amd M. C. Anderson, "Schemata as Scaffolding for the Representation of Information in Connected Discourse," *American Educational Research Journal* 15 (1978): 433-39; and J. Piaget and B. Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

[11] A. Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977).

[12] J. Epstein, ed., *Masters: Portraits of Great Teachers* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

[13] A. T. Jersild, *When Teachers Face Themselves* (New York: Teachers College, 1955).

[14] *Ibid.* Also see C. R. Rogers, *Freedom to Learn for the '80s* (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill, 1983).

[15] P. W. Jackson, "The Way Teaching Is," *Contemporary Thought on Teaching* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

[16] Green, *op. cit.*

[17] H. A. Thelen, "Authenticity, Legitimacy, and Productivity: A Study of the Tensions among Values Underlying Educational Activity," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 14 (1982): 29-41.

[18] Ausubel, *op. cit.*