

A CONCEPTION OF EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

KLAUS ISSLER

Michigan State University, Erickson 518, East Lansing, Michigan 48823

How one views teaching significantly affects how one practices teaching. The process-product orientation to teaching, the most common conception of teaching, presumes too much of a causal relation between teaching and learning and, thus, requires a greater degree of teacher accountability than is realistic and necessary. Instead, a more circumscribed conception of teaching is offered as the basis for an inquiry into excellence in teaching. Finally, a suggestive list of eleven factors is presented as ingredients which are essential for excellent teaching to occur.

An enormous amount of our human and financial resources has been invested in the mission of teaching the children and youth of America. Despite this tremendous effort, there is still a lack of understanding about the fundamental nature of excellence in teaching. A perusal of the literature will convince one that very little theory undergrids research on teaching. In one review of teaching behavior research, Brophy (1979) admits that "most of this research is heavily empirical, guided by no systematic theory and, in fact, very little theory at all" (p. 738). This lack of theoretical knowledge affects our attempts to improve instruction. As indicated by Travers, (1981) "there is no single concept of what the teacher should be undertaking in the classroom" (p. 22). Consequently, each teacher has his or her own conception of teaching, however inconsistent and implicit it might be.

Green (1971) explains that 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" (p. 71). Hyman (1974) 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" (p. 35).

Clarifying a conception of teaching

(and excellence in teaching) is not only necessary 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 importantly, a conception of excellence in teaching, should elucidate these essential elements. This study 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," i.e. they are more relevant for specific age groups, specific ability levels, or specific subject matter (Gage, 1979). The focus of this study will be on those teaching activities and concerns which 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 depend-

ably linked to student achievement (Medley, 1979, Doyle, 1977). The weakness of this model is that it assumes a simple, linear cause-effect relationship between teaching and learning. Dunkin and Biddle (1974), in their approach to studying classroom teaching, have identified at least eight classes of variables, besides that of teacher behavior, which should be studied for influence on student learning. 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." (Travers, 1981, p. 17). One important student characteristic which 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 distinction between teaching as intention and teaching as achievement (Magee, 1971). In teaching as achievement, there is a direct, causal relationship 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 (1963), Anderson (1978), as well as Piaget (and Inhelder, 1969) have suggested that a student's cognitive structures play an important role as ideational anchors. Through interactional experience 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 a number of other reasons. Thus, in assessing teaching effectiveness, we should also consider the factor of the quality of learning which 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 (cf. Bandura, 1977). As

McLuhan has popularly stated, the medium is the message. Both the modeling which the teacher does, as well as the environment of schooling, may either complement the intended message, or they may contradict the message and hinder learning. Although the teacher is partly responsible here, there are a host of variables which influence student learning that are institutional and societal—beyond any individual teacher's direct control.

What has been described, then, is that many more factors affect student learning than just teaching, such as: (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 actively and meaningfully involve themselves in personally constructing their own knowledge and experience of a particular subject matter.

Toward Excellence in Teaching

With the above 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 which 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 life-style of the teacher. Are the aims which are taught exemplified by the teacher. The popular concept of "master teachers" bears out this emphasis on the personal life of the teacher. Those who have given testimony to their great teacher have recalled how these master teachers (cf. Epstein, 1981) were consumed by their particular subject, as well as 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 proclaimed to know truth. Jesus manifested the holiest life of all, preaching and living the truth. Jersild (1954) indicates that only teachers who are themselves moving toward self-actualization are in a position to guide this process in others. Thus, excellent teaching is not an activity which is solely confined to the classroom, but it is rather a habit, a way of life.

Mastery of the subject matter. The quality of mastery of the subject matter by the teacher will affect a teacher's ability to teach excellently. Subject matter may be conceived as isolated or in relationship to other disciplines. It may be viewed as a group of facts (i.e., content), or as both content and process (i.e., 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 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 the student's best effort can no longer be assumed. With what disposition does the student 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 only be possible with 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 not promote social progress and the advancement of civilization. Aims should encourage the cultivation of the good for the individual and for society. Socrates confronted his listeners with questions pertaining to fundamental reality. Jesus directed his audience to make a decision about their participation and commitment to the Kingdom of God. Jersild (1954) and Rogers (1983) both suggest that teaching should be aimed at aiding the student in attaining self-actualization.

The criteria one selects to judge the worthiness of aims will reflect a view of life, a view of education, and a view of 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 (1962) has made a useful distinction when he identifies "preactive" teaching as those activities which the teacher usually does alone (e.g., lesson planning, reading, creative thinking, arranging classroom furniture, etc.), and "interactive" teaching as that aspect of teaching which involves both the student and teacher. Much 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 (1971) designed a continuum in which teaching activities were related to their use of students' intelligence. Those activities which do not encourage the students to use their intelligence such as conditioning and indoctrinating were not considered to be 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 (1982) entitled this factor, "productivity." It relates to the supportive, social cooperation that is fostered—the kind of working relationships which are 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 which can be very meaningful (cf. Ausubel, 1963). Regardless of whether it be mainly mental activity of a student listening to a lecture, or more active participation in a group discussion, are students challenged to personally construct their own knowledge and experience, or are they only directed 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 non-verbal) 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 student.

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% level or at the 75% or 50%

level? Does the teacher consistently pursue excellence, or only infrequently?

The Outcomes of Teaching

Effect of student learning. Though teaching does not guarantee learning, there is a close concomitant relationship 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 realm. Since teaching intends to bring about learning, we should expect learning, but we should also ask to what degree of quality and duration of learning 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, thus, requires a greater degree of teacher accountability 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 ingredients in excellent teaching 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 variable be manifested? Further study will be required to deal with these issues.

Reference List

- Anderson, R. C., Spiro, R. J., and Anderson, M. C. Schemata as scaffolding for the representation of information in connected dis-

- course. *American Educational Research Journal*, 1978, 15, 433-439.
- Ausubel, D. *The psychology of meaningful verbal learning*. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1963.
- Bandura, A. *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1977.
- Brophy, J. E. Teacher behavior and its effects. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 1979, 71, 733-750.
- Doyle, W. Paradigms for research on teacher effectiveness. In L. S. Shulman (Ed.), *Review of Research in Education*, 1977, 5, 163-179.
- Dunkin, M. J., and Biddle, B. J. *The study of teaching*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974.
- Epstein, J. (Ed.). *Masters: Portraits of great teachers*. New York: Basic Books, 1981.
- Gage, N. L. The generality of dimensions of teaching. In P. L. Peterson and H. J. Walberg (Eds.), *Research on teaching: Concepts, findings, and implications*. Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishers, 1979.
- Green, T. F. A topology of the teaching concept. In R. T. Hyman (Ed.), *Contemporary thought on teaching*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971.
- Hyman, R. T. *Ways of teaching*. (2nd ed.), Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1974.
- Jackson, P. W. The way teaching is. In R. T. Hyman (Ed.), *Contemporary thought on teaching*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971.
- Jersild, A. T. *When teachers face themselves*. New York: Teachers College, 1955.
- Magee, J. B. *Philosophical analysis in education*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
- Medley, D. M. The effectiveness of teachers. In P. L. Peterson and H. J. Walberg (Eds.), *Research on teaching: Concepts, findings, and implications*. Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing, 1979.
- Piaget, J., and Inhelder, B. *The psychology of the child*. New York: Basic Books, 1969.
- Rogers, C. R. *Freedom to Learn for the 80's*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1983.
- Thelen, H. A. Authenticity, legitimacy and productivity: a study of the tensions among values underlying educational activity. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 1982, 14, 29-41.
- Travers, R. W. Criteria of good teaching. In J. Millman (Ed.), *Handbook of teacher evaluation*. Beverly Hills, California: Sage, 1981.

How to Become a Successful Freelance Writer. A Practice Guide to Getting Published. Jordan R. Young. Moonstone Press, Anaheim, California, 1981, 70 pp. The author maintains that nothing is more rewarding than seeing your own name in print. The book is a compendium of practical information and tricks of the trade drawn from many years of experience by the author. The author maintains that "You are what you write", and "The early bird gets the worm". He also discusses "Marketing your works", as well as "Protecting your interests". He has written many articles for the New York Times, and tells how to get an article into the New York Times. He discusses how to get quotes from reluctant subjects, and then how to slant your article for a specific market. He covers such subjects as "How to edit and rewrite quotes without misquoting", and How to collect from an editor who refuses to pay". Finally, he suggests that one might expand articles into books. *The Psychology of Creativity and Discovery. Scientists and Their Work.* Richard S. Mansfield and Thomas V. Busse. Nelson-Hall, Chicago, 1981, 160 pp. The authors seek to explore the current state of creativity in the areas of psychological testing, child-rearing influences on creativity, and the creative process itself. The authors construct a new and well-founded model of the creativity personality, the developmental antecedents of creativity, and the creative process. The authors argue that the validity of creativity tests can only be established by correlating test performance with real life creativity. Using this criteria they look closely at forty-seven tests which purport to be related to creativity. They find that divergent thinking tests, currently in widespread use fail to show significant correlation with actual creative accomplishments in science. In their investigation of the creative process, the authors use and third person accounts of discovery for a number of scientists included are such persons as: Einstein, Kepler, Darwin, Marie Curie, and James Watson.