

Teacher Education for Liberating Learning

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Abstract

Education happens in many contexts –at home, among friends, at school, other activities, etc–All of our vital experiences make us grow and mature; some more than others, some otherwise than others. By their ability to make learners experiment many real situations, active learning methods make learning easier, acting as a catalyser and reducing the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. They allow the full development of the person using some natural impulses – discovery, experimentation, meeting diversity, etc. This sort of experiential learning enhances a practical approach when coping with new or unusual situations. In the 21st century this is an asset for everyday life. People do not learn only at school, but also outside. We test and we also learn about life through our body, our senses, all our emotions and sensibility. The educator, as a facilitator, has a key role to support this situational learning process – which makes him, indeed, a tutor. As talent liberators, these pedagogies want to help young people discover and develop their full potential to find their own path of life. Many educational trends have developed strategies for learning beyond traditional school curriculum. The child or learner is no longer someone into whom knowledge is poured; he becomes the master of his own learning. The child becomes the one who develops his multiple intelligences: he himself can choose what he will learn. Thus, through active teaching, he will choose not just for himself but also for and with his community of peers – sharing projects, organization and action. This vision of the human being – often found in the new pedagogies – wants to make the child or learner meet his own reality. Recent evidence also indicates that reforms of teacher education creating more tightly integrated programs with extended clinical preparation interwoven with coursework on learning and teaching produce teachers who are both more effective and more likely to enter and stay in teaching.

Key Words: teacher, education, liberated learning

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Introduction

An important contribution of teacher education is its development of teachers' abilities to examine teaching from the perspective of learners who bring diverse experiences and frames of reference to the classroom. Teaching is emotional, especially when teachers must change their practices. Self-regulation usually refers to awareness and knowledge of one's learning and cognition and the control of one's cognition that renders this ability essential in learning and development. Recently, the concept has been studied intensively, except in professional learning.

A revised role for teacher educators in shaping an emerging course room culture is presented, acknowledging the realities of power and ideology that influence the daily practices in the course room. E-learning can be a powerful means of creating open educational resources accessible to everybody thus counteracting a divided knowledge society. In this paper, the educational trends of developing different learning strategies for learning beyond traditional school curriculum. The child is developing in all areas and not only intellectually. He is exploring the world in accordance with his preferences and making it a little better. This vision of the human being – often found in the new pedagogies – wants to make the child or learner meet his own reality.

The Teacher as Reflective Practitioner

It stands to reason that, if teachers are to be effective in the approaches they decide to take, they should act in accordance with their espoused beliefs. In reality, though, this is hardly the case. According to Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (1974, 1978), there is usually a discrepancy between what teachers say they believe (their "espoused" theories) and the ways in which they act (their "theories-in-action"). What could resolve this discrepancy is an attempt to help teachers become "reflective practitioners" (Shon, 1983), thereby subjecting their professional practice to ongoing critical reflection and making clear their own particular world view. Smyth (1991: 116) suggests that this critical reflection can be fostered by means of asking a number of questions:

- What do my practices say about my assumptions, values and beliefs about teaching?
- Where did these ideas come from?
- What views of power do they embody?
- Whose interests do my practices seem to serve?

While critical reflection is not negative in its own right, it does imply that teachers should be cognizant of their belief systems, in order to monitor how far their actions reflect those beliefs. However, in keeping with constructivism, becoming effective and autonomous is a

shared process, whereby both teachers and learners monitor, reflect, and act. Thus, a teacher needs to look both inwards and outwards. She needs to become aware of others' points of view, as well as her own beliefs - about learners, about learning per se, and about herself. **Teachers' beliefs**

Beliefs cannot be defined or evaluated, but there are a number of things that we should know about them. Beliefs are culturally bound and, since they are formed early in life, they tend to be resistant to change. By virtue of the fact that they are difficult to measure, we almost always have to infer people's beliefs from the ways in which they act rather than from what they say they believe.

Beliefs about Learners

Teachers hold any or a combination of beliefs about their students. Roland Meighan (1990) suggests that there are at least seven different ways in which teachers construe learners and that such evaluative constructions have a profound influence on their classroom practice. So, according to him, learners may be construed as:

- resisters
- receptacles
- raw material
- clients
- partners
- individual explorers
- democratic explorers

These constructs are seen in terms of a continuum which mirrors the nature of the teacher-learner power relationship. Thus, the first three constructs are teacher dominated, whereas the latter involve learner participation. More specifically, the notion of learners as resisters sees learners as recalcitrant individuals who do not wish to learn. This assumption, however, gives rise to the assertion that punishment is the most appropriate way of overcoming such "recalcitrance."

An even more common conception of learners is one in which they are viewed as receptacles to be filled with knowledge. The teacher is seen as having a "jug" of knowledge which he pours into the learners' "mugs." This is what Freire (1970) describes as the "banking" concept of education, where learners are like bank accounts where deposits are made and drawn upon.

Even though we have not dwelled upon Meighan's theory in detail, it should be apparent by now that constructivism fits more comfortably with the latter end of the abovementioned continuum.

Beliefs about Learning

Teaching is not indivisible from learning. We can be good teachers only if we know what we mean by learning because only then can we know what we expect our learners to achieve. If our goal is to prepare our students to pass an exam, then this will affect the way in which we teach. If we see foreign language learning as a perennial process which has social and cultural implications, then we will take a different approach to teaching it. Gow and Kember (1993) suggest that most approaches to learning can be subsumed under any of the following points:

- a quantitative increase in knowledge
- memorization
- the acquisition of facts and procedures which can be retained and / or used in practice
- the abstraction of meaning
- an interpretative process aimed at the understanding of reality
- some form of personal change

Teachers' beliefs about themselves

For humanistic teachers, teaching is essentially a personal expression of the self, which has particular implications with regard to teachers' views of themselves, since a teacher who lacks self-esteem will not be able to build the self-esteem of others. The teacher who does not accept his learners for who they are makes it difficult for them to accept themselves.

Self-regulated Learning and Teacher Education

The motivation for this study of self-regulated learning in the context of teacher education emerged from both the need to restructure teacher education programmes, and the importance attributed to self-regulated learning. In the next sections we consider these two aspects and provide a framework for the scope of this study. Restructuring teacher education (Lieberman, 1993) and revitalizing programmes for learning to teach (Darling-Hammond, 1996) coincide with new conceptions of professional development and presuppose ideas about the acquisition of professional knowledge (Brooks, 1994).

Teachers perceived as caring tend to endorse more humanistic orientations towards classroom management (Willower, Eidell, & Hoy, 1976). Caring teachers view students as able to learn responsibility for self-regulating their own behavior and view themselves as participating in the process of socializing necessary skills and values. The classroom

becomes a place in which students learn about the value of rules and rule making and the teacher is a conduit for understanding social order. These classrooms tend to be more supportive of students' autonomy and emphasize the value of social negotiation (DeVries & Zan, 1996; see also Reeve, 2006). In contrast, teachers endorsing more custodial orientations tend to view undisciplined behavior as an indicator of irresponsibility and respond by increasing control and enforcing punitive sanctions. Sadly, a strong emphasis on law or order, without explicit rationales, may leave students feeling manipulated. Teachers perceived as caring do have some custodial elements in their classroom; not everything is negotiable and there are consequences for poor choices. However, caring teachers are willing to negotiate some elements of classroom life, they express clear expectations for students' self-management of behavior, and they are willing to endure somewhat more interpersonal conflict in the classroom.

Caring for All Students

This task of trying to understand students becomes challenging when students and teachers come from different cultural backgrounds. Jacqueline Irvine introduced the concept of cultural synchronization to describe the ways in which conflict is generated in relationships between students of minority backgrounds and their teachers when values, patterns of interaction, and ways of being are not aligned. In two seminal studies, Monroe and Obidah (2004) and Blackburn (2005) identified the ways in which majority teachers and minority students become out of sync with each other by misinterpreting each other's intentions and actions. From this perspective, caring teachers are those who seek to develop cultural competence when interacting with students from different backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 2001) and strive to understand the perspectives of each student in their classroom.

Students Feel Their Understanding Matters

The perception of caring by students also has a strong instructional component. Teachers perceived as caring delineate intellectual boundaries, including what will be learned and the standards for mastery. Caring teachers are focused on cultivating student interest in the content they are teaching and employ a variety of strategies that connect content to their students' lives. Caring teachers set high expectations for all students in their classes and press their students to understand the material, not merely for the sake of performing on a test but to understand the world around them. Among teachers who push their students to excel, what distinguishes teachers perceived as caring is the quality of their interpersonal interactions with students. Across the literature, caring teachers have been defined as warm demanders, an idea conceived by Judith Kleinfeld (1975). Warm demanders exert

influence on their students' learning through their relationship. They are not willing to let a child turn in lesser quality work or fail; instead, with compassion, they express their belief that their students can do better and are willing to work with students to improve their work.

It is the hope of the faculty that prospective teachers who exit this program will have developed these insights:

A. Knowledge is interrelated. It is the responsibilities of the program to prepare teachers who help students discover fundamental relationships between and among disciplines. This belief leads the Greensboro College faculty to emphasize cooperative learning, Socratic methodology, and integration of content and whole language. Consequently faculty also engage in considerable dialogue among ourselves as we share experiences, research, and concerns.

B. Students learn in diverse ways. Learning itself is shaped by numerous factors such as prior knowledge, experience, and achievement. Feelings of adequacy and cultural history also impact upon what and how one learns. Such beliefs me courage the faculty to become more flexible and versatile in teaching and planning instruction. It requires us to critically observe and listen to our students, and evaluates ourselves so that we may model reflective practice for our prospective teachers. This belief system encourages us, as individuals and as a professional body, to value human diversity. We, as a faculty, emphasize a variety of teaching methods and techniques, including cooperative and active learning. Such methods facilitate the release of gifts, talents, and insights in us and our students.

Teacher Education Program and shape our learning goals:

Knowing students as learners.Teacher Education students understand their pupils as individuals and members of communities and know how to shape instruction that builds on their interests, strengths, and needs as thinkers and doers.

Teaching for understanding.Teacher Education students learn how to make academic content a resource for inquiry and a means of giving pupils wider access to the world. They explore ways to teach to ambitious standards for all children, and learn principles and practices of assessment aligned with those standards and purposes.

Inquiry.Teacher Education students learn to promote curiosity, and they make inquiry a central part of their professional practice as teachers.

Social Justice. Teacher Education students create classrooms in which pupils practice respect, fairness and decency and learn to contribute to the development of a just society

Critical Understandings: Students who complete the teacher education minor will

understand:

- the diverse ways that children explore, learn, and develop their interests inside and outside of the classroom;
- the importance of knowing the subject/s they teach in coherent and flexible ways;
- the relationship between race, class, and gender and educational opportunity; and
- The urgency of helping their pupils learn literacy and numeracy skills, effective communication, critical thinking, and working well with others in our democracy and interdependent world.

Core Skills: Student teachers who successfully complete the minor will be able to:

- prepare curriculum and adapt curricular materials to engage and challenge the diverse learners they teach;
- plan and employ a repertoire of instructional strategies and assessments so as to motivate and involve students in worthwhile learning;
- create and maintain a safe and respectful learning community in the classroom;
- promote equity in the classroom and school;
- work productively with families and colleagues; and
- reflect on their teaching and learn from experience

Implications for Teachers

To be caring means to be willing to critically evaluate what and for whom one actively cares. Doing so entails being reflective of whether there is a match or mismatch between the things one cares about and the needs of one's students. To be caring means to be thoughtful about the scope of one's caring—including the extent to which one cares about maintaining or challenging the status quo, representing an authoritative view or allowing student conceptions to be at the forefront, and to create potential for what is personal to mingle with what is academic. To end here, however, would fail to acknowledge a tension in the caring teacher literature in that teachers who care more may be more prone to feeling emotional exhaustion, to becoming burnt out and to leaving the field (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). Finally, to be a caring teacher inherently means to identify ways to care for oneself (Ben-Ze'ev, 2006); to create healthy intellectual and interpersonal boundaries and to identify sources of support for when the task of caring for a student, or a group of students, is beyond one's resources.

Conclusion

There is no such thing as "the perfect teacher." Giving a homily on what "good teachers" do appears to be unhelpful and unrewarding to those who want to improve their own practices. A far more helpful approach seems to be the study of teachers' beliefs, which inform and shape their actions. Constructivism lies at the heart of this endeavour, as it offers valuable insights into the cognitive as well as affective aspects of the relationship between teachers and their self-images, and teachers and students. Teaching is not merely information or knowledge, but mainly an expression of values and attitudes. What teachers usually get back from their students is what they themselves have brought to the teaching-learning process.

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