

Teaching Philosophy

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Introduction:

A teaching philosophy can be defined as “a study of the theoretical basis of the knowledge and or experience of teaching.”¹ Writing and reading teaching philosophies allows teachers to reflect upon teaching theory and their own experience in order to improve. To consider my teaching philosophy, as an economist, I look at teaching from an economic perspective as an important and essential input into the production and consumption of education, the process through which human minds are inspired to learn, that is, acquire knowledge. First I consider the importance to the teacher of understanding the nature of the output, education, and establish its fundamentality and importance and also the teacher’s role as an important and essential input. This is followed by a discussion of inputs to good teaching and evaluating the education output.

Understanding the Nature of Education and its Fundamental Importance:

Understanding the nature of the education output and its importance should provide teachers with the motivation and enthusiasm to improve their teaching while also helping teachers to evaluate their quality and hence whether to vary their teaching inputs.

Teaching produces education, which is both a consumption and a production good. It is an instrumental consumption good needed to acquire other happiness generating consumption goods and it has also been argued that it feeds directly into happiness by satisfying the “need” to learn. According to Maslow’s “theory of a hierarchy of needs” (1968), the acquisition of knowledge is necessary to enable individuals to achieve self-actualization at the top of the hierarchy.² As such, although not uncontroversial, i.e. ignorance can be bliss³, education and the process of acquiring it, learning, are thought by some to be an essential input into the creation of happiness (utility). Consistent with this view, John Dewey (1897) wrote:

“Education ... is a process of living, and not a preparation for future living”

In addition, educated minds are an essential input into human productive activity. For example, John F. Kennedy (1961) in Special Message to the Congress on Education stated that:

“The human mind is our fundamental resource”

Education is also an investment good (Dewey, 1898), which is referred to as “human capital” by economists. It builds up if more is invested, it can depreciate if not used, and the knowledge created is shared as a part of a social process.

¹ This definition is based on the American Oxford Dictionary definition of “philosophy” on the MAC

² Stuart Mill (1861) and Al Gore (1992) appear to also express this view.

³ For example, see Festinger (1962)

The above has touched on the nature of education and its fundamental importance such that the importance of the “essential good-teaching input” for both the individual and for society as a whole cannot be overemphasized; Moreover, the effects of good teaching extend far beyond the learning of one’s own students due to networks of external benefits to other 3rd parties in society.

Now that I have considered the nature and importance of the teaching output, educating human minds, I move on to consider the inputs to good teaching.

Inputs to Good Teaching:

Understanding of the fundamental importance of good teaching and Education:

The first input is that the teacher understands that the output of good teaching, education, is of utmost importance and so appreciates and understands her great potential to contribute towards the happiness of her students and society as a whole. This increases the chance that she is 1) highly motivated to do her best to teach students and 2) is enthusiastic about the task helping to motivate students to want to learn.

With respect to her course content, she should think about if and why this course content is of great learning value to her students, and, if not, change it. This will help to maintain her motivation and enthusiasm to teach and she will, of course, be genuinely concerned about student learning.

Consistent with the above discussion, two of the seven input rating categories on Dalhousie’s student quantitative teaching evaluations ask students to rate professors according to “enthusiasm” and “concern for learning”.

Planning the Curriculum:

Prior to teaching the course, the curriculum needs to be mapped out. The teacher may need to devote time and effort to learn the content and ideas in order to plan. It may be wise to depend tentatively on textbook content for course structure if this is the first time teaching the course as the teacher may be learning as s(he) goes. His or her main tasks are to determine:

- What are the main knowledge objectives of the course?
- What should students be able to do with this knowledge at the end of the course? (skills)
- How should topics be organized to allow ideas to build upon each other and to enable students to make links?
- What are students’ pre-course expected knowledge and skills?
- How can students with different learning styles and knowledge, skills and abilities be accommodated?
- What teaching methods will work for this course?
- How can active learning be integrated into this course?
- How will learning be assessed in this course?

Planning the Lesson:

Similar to when planning the curriculum, when planning the lesson, first and foremost, the teacher needs to input effort and time to 1) understand the material and 2) make the lesson plan.

Making the lesson plan can be helped by using lesson plan sheets. My thoughts on the inputs to the lesson plan are to ask oneself the following questions:

- What are the key ideas and skills you are trying to teach and why are these important? (learning objectives)
- What do students know prior to the class? How will you build upon and relate the lesson to knowledge the students already have?
- How are you going to motivate students to want to learn the material? For example, if your students want to be investment bankers, tell them they will need to understand Net Present Value to analyze bank investments. It is particularly important to consider “hooks” at the start of the lecture and possibilities for short breakout group exercises to maintain attention.
- How are you going to teach the material and why? This includes content and activity structuring within the lesson and thinking about which teaching method(s) will best enable the learning of the objective(s).
- How will you engage your students in thinking about course ideas? What questions will promote thinking? How can the lesson intellectually stimulate the students to ask good questions?
- How will you incorporate active learning into this lesson plan?
- How can you accommodate different learning styles and knowledge backgrounds and abilities?
- What, pre and post class activities will supplement the in-class material and why?
- How will you assess student learning during and after the lesson? After the lesson, the teacher needs to make time to reflect on what worked and what didn't work, consider the reasons and keep records to improve future classes. A specific challenge for economists is how to balance the teaching of mathematical models with real world context. For my classes, I also struggle with the benefits of linking up ideas from different disciplines (ex. sustainability and economics) without overwhelming the students.

Assessing the Outputs of Good Teaching:

The output of good teaching is learning, the education of minds. Assessment is difficult but a starting point is to determine the learning objectives of the assessment -- What is the student supposed to be learning in this assignment and how are they learning it? How can the assignment be improved to enable the learning objectives? Careful grading of at least some course work will provide insights into what students are understanding and what they are struggling with thus helping to provide feedback for both subsequent teaching and subsequent assessments. Active learning such as in-class breakout group exercises and Socratic questioning can enable the teacher to gauge student progress during the lesson. Student evaluations and mid-course “stop-start and continue” surveys

provide feedback of students' perceptions on effective elements of the teacher's teaching and suggestions for improvement. Perhaps most important, however, is to provide students with feedback on their learning with suggestions for how to improve and also feedback on what they have done well so that they gain genuine confidence in their ability to learn.

After students graduate, they will forget many of the facts they have learned. However, if teaching is of high quality, due to actively engaging students in thinking and learning how to solve problems with well designed feedback—students will have “learned how to learn” so that they can teach themselves. As students “learn how to learn” and achieve learning success, they will learn that learning is rewarding increasing their motivation to learn further; They will graduate with the ability and confidence to continue the enjoyable lifelong process of learning on their own. As such, the teacher will have met their broad and fundamental objective of participating as an essential input in “inspiring minds”. As discussed earlier, it is essential that teachers understand the great and essential importance of their profession as this will help them to maintain their enthusiasm and genuine concern for student learning and this, in turn, will make students want to learn.

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