

Opinion Piece

A Personal Teaching Philosophy and Practice Through the Mind's Reflective Thoughts

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Abstract

This is an overview of my teaching philosophy and some factors that influence my thinking and ideas. This teaching philosophy evolved from a perception of education as it relates to the operative and cooperative arts. One can say that my philosophical viewpoints on education are somewhat eclectic as they relate to the operative versus cooperative arts question. I tend to believe that effective educators should look upon the operative and cooperative arts as being symbiotic, in the sense that one cooperates with both the established canons of a society and the existing natural laws of human learning. By having established a well-thought out theory or philosophy, people tend to know more what they are doing and why.

Introduction

What is offered in this paper is an overview of a teaching philosophy and some factors that influence my thinking and ideas. This avowal is not to be considered a "concrete," or "dyed in the wool" position as it relates to my teaching philosophy. It is intended to show the basis for my teaching strategies and the character of my thinking, be what it may.

Premises

Let us approach this topic by establishing two primary premises. First, according to personal notions, education is a process of teaching members of a society how they are expected to behave in varied situations that is conformable to what is right and proper. This means that "education" addresses the task of introducing changes in human behavior by transmitting to learners beliefs, attitudes, skills, and other components of behavior not previously acquired.

The second premise is that human behavior is es-

entially social. This premise is based upon the belief that human behavior is greatly influenced by the mores of a given society. Behavior that is the result of either direct association and influence by previous associations with members of a society. In other words, a majority of what one learns is the result of direct interaction between members of a society and involves socially oriented activities. This premise likewise is supported by John Dewey's view of education when he stated ". . . education resides in the fact that it is the means whereby social life is transmitted (Hill, 1973). Stroud (1946) best sums these two premises by defining education as "the process which societies perpetuate or renew themselves."

Operative and Cooperative Arts

There are two categories that all human endeavors can be placed: the operative arts and the cooperative arts. The operative arts are those activities where human beings operate on nature to bring about some desired effect that nature itself cannot achieve (Adler, 1942). An example would be a logger cuts trees into logs, a sawmill operator saws the logs into lumber, and a carpenter takes the lumber and constructs a home. In each instance, logs, lumber, and home, the product would not have come into existence without the direct and active interventions of human intelligence. When educators are amongst the operative artists, there is a feeling of producing something, something that nature by itself cannot produce. An educator in this category, therefore, introduces to students certain traits that they did not possess naturally. Since the character of these traits generally evolve from a surrounding culture, there is a constant need to be interpreting the culture to make sure that one is not teaching irrelevant traits and that the learned traits are compatible to the society's mores. Hence, studying the curriculum and constantly, revising, eliminating, adding to it is es-

sential and as the curriculum changes, so must the teaching methodology (Adler, 1942).

The cooperative arts, on the other hand, are those activities where humans simply cooperate with nature, assisting it and facilitating it by prudent attention and timely prodding (Adler, 1942). Consider grain farmers as an example. They do not create an ear of corn. They simply cooperate with the customary procedures of nature in growing an ear of corn. Through knowledge of the botanical processes, climatic patterns, and soil characteristics, the grain farmer oversees the cultural procedures that causes a kernel to naturally "evolve" into an ear of corn. When educators use the cooperative arts, they have the feeling of not actually creating anything, but just an assistant. They are assisting a pre-existent set of natural principles found in every human. In other words one is helping human nature that is in some form found in every human being. Since these natural principles are then common to all students as human beings, the teaching methods are then generally the same for everyone. In schools where this thinking is prevalent, the curriculum is based upon the natural "built-in" tendencies of all learners, it does not have to be designed to meet individual needs or be modernized from year to year (Adler, 1942).

If all human endeavors can categorically be placed into one of the two arts, then I pose the question, "into what category does the educational efforts in the public and private institutions of learning fall, in the operative or cooperative arts?" Here is a theoretical question, in my opinion, that makes a fundamental difference in one's philosophy of education and teaching style.

Theory and Philosophy

Every important human activity can be shown to have a basis in theory, a centralizing idea of what it is all about, what it is trying to do, and how it functions in human experience (Morris 1961). We attempt to organize theories into one colossal theory, that in turn, seeks to harmonize, integrate, rationalize, and explain all the different concepts one has established to this point. This activity is called philosophy (Morris 1961).

If Morris's hypotheses for the term philosophy is acceptable, then a philosopher seeks to find the single formula where all human acquisition of knowledge can be understood and managed. In this, philosophers are principally engaged in the process of unifying a master set of consistent ideas, so that when issues evolve and answers are not readily available, they can look to their theory as a guide to a practical solution. It is in this sense that a good theory is the most practical thing an educator can have. By having established a well-thought-out theory or philosophy, educators tend to know more what they are doing and why (Morris 1961).

Philosophy of Education

One can say that my philosophical viewpoints on education are somewhat eclectic as they relate to the operative versus cooperative arts question. I tend to believe that effective educators should look upon the operative and cooperative arts as being symbiotic, in the sense that one cooperates with both the established canons of a society and the existing natural laws of human learning.

If I were to classify my philosophy as it relates to education into one or more of the more traditional philosophic concepts, I would need to say that there is a tendency to have leanings toward the concepts of Experimentalism, Realism, seasoned with a small amount Idealism and a dash of Existentialism. To justify this classification, let us briefly discuss how I view the learners, learning methods, and techniques of teaching.

Learners

Generally, I am a proponent of the learner-centered concepts of education because learners need to be involved in the learning process. They are the medium with what an educator works to mold and shape in an effort to prepare them for a life within the society they must acquire a livelihood. The learning process, in my opinion, must begin with learners identifying their own interests, curiosities, and concerns. College students must be encouraged and helped to ultimately narrow and specify their curiosities and interests to a feasible scheme so that an appropriate curriculum will gradually guide them into an academic and career direction. They will need to investigate and research their interests, test their findings for adequacy, and finally, establish well-thought-out conclusions. During this sequence of activities, the learner will obviously require academic advising, acquisition of relevant information, skills in organizing information, and require the capability of making sense out of what they have found and learned. Furthermore, some learners may need more time than others to complete these activities. Nevertheless, only the learner can manipulate this sequence of activities that ultimately leads to ownership of their destiny and taking responsibility for their actions.

Learning Methods

I perceive problem-solving as perhaps the more desired learning method because it connotes a much broader sphere of application. Basically, my orientation can be affiliated with John Dewey's (Hill, 1973) premise that "... science is problem-solving and its method is generalizable to social life." The problem-solving approach to teaching in a college or university classroom enables the educator to provide op-

portunities and situations for the learner to experience. This experience initiates academic curiosity and growth.

Experience has an enormous power to teach. However, not all experiences teach equally as well. But circumstances that cause learners to bring forth concerns, awaken interests, and a wanting to understand the situation, are the kinds of circumstances that are problematic and it's this type of experience, in my opinion, where genuine learning takes place. The learner should be excited and possess a compulsion to learn. Hence, problem-solving and experiential learning characterize the learning methods used in my classes.

Techniques of Teaching

Lecture: Lecturing is quite a flexible method of interpreting information and knowledge that cannot be brought into the classroom. The kinds of things it can do include describing, defining, explaining, analyzing, inquiring, provoking, and exciting. However, grammar as we know it, is not found in nature. It is found only as a symbolic product of the civilization of humans. To rely heavily on symbolic communication is to promote the notion that only ideas are the medium through how students learn about their world. However, given the financial constraints faced by many institutions of learning, lectures are considered an economic method of disseminating information to learners.

Demonstration: Demonstration is the technique for presenting the world to the students through more of the senses. However, demonstrations must do more than exhibit pre-existent reality beyond the classroom. It must lead the learners to curiosities, questions, problems, and eventual investigations by the learners themselves.

Project: Project method of instruction takes the learner from the modeling of foregoing reality by word (lecture or reading assignments) or deed (demonstrations) to the direct involvement of learners in the world of actual experience. Here, with the direct use of their knowledge, the learners begin to learn it. It can be argued by some that the project method is a complete waste of time and all they have to show in the end is a completed project. Some claim the end results show no "solid knowledge" that can be measured; or there is no new enlightenment of the subject matter under study. I maintain that by getting the learners to put their minds and hands directly to some real situation as it exists in the real world by means of a project, the end result will stimulate and awaken more genuine learning. One of my graduate school professors once stated in a lecture, "the project method is the learner's version of the research scholar's scientific method." Granted the magnitude

and level of sophistication of the two versions are quite different, but when one looks at the overall properties of the two, there are several denominators.

In reality and based upon 39 years of teaching, I find the judicious use of the lecture method combined with a balanced blend of demonstrations, projects, and experiential learning activities result in effective teaching and learning.

Educational Philosophy in Practice

Everyone who desires to further their education should have a chance, regardless of their social or economic status, race, religion, nationality, or sex. Delaware Valley College gave me a chance in 1957, and I have always been indebted to the guidance, support, and encouragement of its faculty who collectively, prepared a framework for the evolution of this aforementioned philosophy of education during the past 39 years. As the professor-in-charge of the Agricultural Science Major at the Pennsylvania State University, giving students a chance to develop their academic and professional interests prevailed in the policies of administering the major. Most, like I, when given a chance, were able to succeed and become contributing members of society.

Once a neighbor near my farm in Ottsville, Pennsylvania congratulated me upon successfully completing my Master's Degree at Lehigh University. He asked, "... what in the world do you need all that education for?" I responded to him, "Web, the more education I get, the 'dumber' I get." Meaning that the more I learn, the more I discover what I don't know. Hence, I yet have a great deal to learn and I don't think it would be fair for me to give a conclusive summary of my philosophy of education or teaching at this stage of my career or life. Even though there are some notions that offer me guidelines on how I teach, there are still many questions that need explanation and clarification. Therefore, to end this personal philosophic viewpoint, I would like to pose some of the questions that I have contemplated and do not yet have adequate comprehensive answers to appease my convictions. Questions such as:

"Should we transmit certain segments of our mores in today's society to the next generations?" "If no or yes, then who makes the decisions as to what should or should not be transmitted?"

"Is a person who has learned 'skills,' educated?"

"When do we consider a person educated?"

"Are my philosophical foundations compatible with the mores of the society I currently live?" "if yes, according to whom and why?"

"Does Adler's postulation on the operative and cooperative arts apply to 'futuristic' educational

endeavors?"

"What is an exemplary teaching method?"

"How does the educational philosophy of each faculty member at an institution of higher learning collectively affect the overall philosophy of the institution?"

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Book Reviews

Advances in Soil Dynamics, Vol. 1,
S.K. Upadhyaya, W.J. Chancellor, J.V. Perumpral,
R.L. Schafer, W.R. Gill, and G.E. VandenBerg,
American Society of Agricultural Engineers,
1994, 313 pp., Hardbound, \$49.50

This book is Monograph Number 12 published by the American Society of Agricultural Engineers. It is the first volume in a series designed to update the reader on recent studies of soil dynamic properties. Properties not covered in this book are planned for subsequent volumes. This book is composed of three chapters. Chapter 1, Soil Dynamics and Soil Bins, is the shortest of the three, being 19 pages in length. Chapter 2, Soil Physical Properties, is by far the longest, having 224 pages. Chapter 3, Advances in Soil-Plant Dynamics, is 25 pages long.

Chapter 1 includes information on: a) Soil Bin History, Experiences, and Advantages; b) Design of Soil Bins; c) Soil Bin Equipment; d) The Bin Soils; e) Soil Fitting Equipment; f) Measuring Equipment; g) Test Procedures; h) Models; and i) Soil Bin Facility Management. Chapter 2 is divided into the following major sections: a) Elemental Soil Material Composition; b) Soil Mass Static Physical Properties; c) Electromagnetic Interactions with Soil; d) Soil Mass Dynamic Properties Definable within a System of Mechanics; e) Em-

pirical Dynamic Properties of Soil; f) Soil Mass Dynamic Load-Deformation Properties Definable within a System of Mechanics (Stress-Strain); and g) Empirical Dynamic Properties. Chapter 3 is divided as follows: a) History of Plant Dynamics/Soil-Root Interaction; b) Soil Conditions as a Medium for Plant Roots; c) The Plant as a Living Physical System; d) Effects of Various Cultural Operations on Soil Parameters that Influence Plant Growth; and e) Conclusions.

This book is not intended for use as a basic text on soil dynamics, but rather as an update of topics on soil dynamics. To this end, the authors begin their topic discussions with a historical background and a few basic concepts. They then expand and update this knowledge by presenting pertinent results from documented research published in professional journals. The book is well written and the authors do an excellent job of selecting appropriate equations, tables, drawings, and graphs from the literature to present a well-connected update on selected topics of soil dynamics. Although not intended as a text for beginning students it does present excellent summaries of basic concepts and updates them in a very logical and understandable manner. Perhaps this book is of the greatest value to graduate students and practitioners who would like to obtain state-of-the-art information on soil dynamic concepts and property measurements.

This book is a welcome addition to my reference shelf.

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