

What, Whom and How a Teacher Teaches

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ABSTRACT

This is a simple paper on teaching based on some pedagogical principles, not on my own empirical investigation. It first aims at showing that a teacher has an inseparable connection with their students and the subject they teach and that teaching is a triadic process. It also aims at showing that in order to maximize the teaching-learning outcome there should be a congruity between a teacher's teaching style and their students' learning styles. Obviously, the 'what' in the title refers to the subject a teacher should teach, the 'whom' refers to the students they are supposed to teach and the 'how' refers to the teaching style a teacher is to adopt.

As a tree is known by its fruit, so a teacher is known by the subject they teach. One who teaches history is called a history teacher and one who teaches English is a teacher of English. 'Subject' here means an area of knowledge. However, 'subject' also means a thing that is taught by a teacher in a particular lesson. It may be better called a subject matter. In this paper what a teacher teaches will rather be called a subject matter. Traditionally, a student's mind is said to be an empty vessel and a teacher's duty is to fill that vessel with grains of knowledge. In other words, a teacher is a reservoir of expert knowledge and they are supposed to impart this knowledge to their students. One is adjudged to be a good teacher who knows their subject matter very well. But the modern view of education is different from this traditional view. It observes that the verb 'to teach' has two objects: one is who is taught and the other is what is taught. For example, in the sentence "He teaches them English", the verb is a ditransitive verb which is followed by two objects. The indirect object 'them' refers to the people who are taught and the direct object 'English' is the subject that is taught by him. A teacher's responsibility does not end with knowing/mastering the subject and imparting knowledge indiscriminately to their students. Modern educational psychology suggests that a teacher's responsibility is also to study their students before planning their lessons. Traditional teachers once put most of their emphasis on the subject they taught but the new ones now put it on

their students. "Teach the child rather than the subject" is the essential principle of new education (Bhatia 2004; 35).

As I consider teaching as a triadic process, "[t]here is always a connection between teacher, student and subject matter" (Hyman & Rosoff 1984:38). However, unlike Bhatia, I would like to suggest that a teacher should maintain a bilateral relationship with their students and the subject matter they teach them giving equal weighting to both. The first question is: what subject matter should a teacher teach? The answer to this question is directly related to the class of students they are going to teach. Therefore, before deciding on what to teach, the teacher must first consider the level of the students and then analyse their needs and interests. In other words, the subject to be taught must be suitable to the level of students and it must also cater to their needs and interests. The subject matter should be both essential and enjoyable. If the subject is interesting in itself, well and good. But if it is dull and uninteresting, a teacher's role is to make it as lively and interesting as possible. A teacher must remember that the input given to students should be comprehensible to them. According to Krashen's theory of learning and his Input Hypothesis, the input should be slightly above the acquirer's present level of competence. "Comprehensible input refers to utterances that the learner understands based on the context in which they are used as well as the language in which they are phrased" (Richards & Rodgers 1995: 132-133). The main point here is that

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teachers should never foist any subject matter on their students. If you force anything down their unwilling throat, they will not be able to digest it properly. So the subject matter you choose to teach your students should be acceptable, intelligible and assimilable to them. A food may be very good and nutritious but it may not suit everybody's stomach. Similar is the case with a subject matter. It may be absolutely suitable for some students but unsuitable for others. That is why, a study of students' tastes, strengths and weaknesses is essential for a teacher before they select a subject matter for teaching. In educational psychology, there are two ways of studying pupils. They may be studied both as individuals and as a class. It is true that no two students are exactly alike; each student is a unique individual. On the other hand, some students may be very much alike in spite of their individual differences. A teacher, therefore, can treat students in both these ways. However, a teacher's knowledge of pupils will provide them with a peculiar influence over them. That knowledge is power is a universal truth and knowledge of students gives a teacher a "power over them which the teacher can use for the achievement of educational ends" (Bhatia 2004: 36).

The instinct of curiosity is called the mother of knowledge and this instinct is very powerful in young students. A teacher in selecting and presenting their materials and lessons should tap this. The teacher should keep in mind that students should consider the subject matter new enough to be known and learnt. "Experienced teachers base every new lesson on the knowledge already acquired and connect it with previous lessons so that children may not be upset by the newness of facts presented" (Bhatia 2004: 151). Bhatia further says, "The standard of teaching should not be so low that pupils consider it unnecessary nor too high that they consider it beyond their reach" (Ibid 202). The teacher's subject matter should be well within the students' power of understanding. Not only that, the new input given by the teacher in a class should be related to the existing knowledge already possessed by the students. This being ensured, the teaching-learning outcome can also be ensured.

I am now turning to the second idea of my topic--the students or learners whom a teacher teaches. It has already been said that the students in a class are different individuals and they have their different learning styles as they have different needs and interests. In what follows I shall briefly discuss different types and characteristics of learners.

Keith Willing (cited in Harmer 2003: 43) divides learners into four categories: convergers, conformists, concrete learners and communicative learners. He observes that convergers are solitary by nature and confident in their own abilities. On the other hand, conformists tend to be

dependent on those in authority. They would like to do only what they are asked to do. They always prefer well-organized teachers. According to Willing, concrete learners are those who enjoy learning by doing. They enjoy games and group work in class. On the contrary, communicative learners are more interested in the use of language than in usage. They love to interact with others. They are perfectly happy to operate without the guidance of a teacher.

Different students have different learning styles. Fischer and Fischer (1979) in their article "Styles in teaching and learning" have identified ten categories of learners (cited in Henson & Borthwick 1984:5) on the basis of their learning styles. The categories are as follows:

1. Incremental learners: those who need a highly structured approach
2. Intuitive learners: unsystematic and sporadic learners who are often unable to explain what has been learnt in an organized manner
3. Sensory specialists: those who rely exclusively on one sense (e.g. visual or auditory)
4. Sensory generalists: those who depend on all senses
5. Emotionally involved learners: those who require an environment both physically and mentally stimulating to "cause a high emotional charge"
6. Emotionally neutral learners: those who require a "low-key" atmosphere
7. Explicitly structured learners: those who need clear objectives and organized lessons
8. Open-ended structure lovers: those who prefer an open-ended to a highly structured environment
9. Damaged learners: those who are physically normal but have a damaged self-concept and negative attitude toward learning
10. Eclectic learners: those who can alter their learning styles to fit the occasion despite having a preference for one or another

Teachers should also keep in mind that there are different psychological types of learners. According to Jung (cited in Bargar & Hoover 1984: 56-57), learners are divided into introverts and extraverts on the basis of their attitudes. An introvert learner is usually withdrawn or shy about dealing with environmental encounters, whereas extraverts are active, energetic and involved in activities most of the time. Introverts are quiet, reserved and often remain unnoticed in classroom activities. In respect of perception functions, Jung observes intuitive and sensing students. The intuitive students tend to perceive information holistically and they usually appear to be imaginative, creative and theoretical in their interests. On the other hand, the sensing students tend to deal with things realistically, observantly and precisely. On the basis of judgment function, Jung mentions thinking and feeling types of students. Judgments made by the thinking type

tend to be logical, analytical and impersonal but judgments made in the feeling mode tend to be oriented by values rather than logic. According to Jung, “Introversion is the polar opposite of extraversion, intuition the polar opposite of sensing and thinking the polar opposite of feeling” (cited in Bargar & Hoover 1984:57).

Now, how to deal with these differences in students is the main concern of a teacher. If you give a well-organized lecture to a class of conformists, all of them will enjoy it and the teaching-learning outcome is likely to be satisfactory. But if there are convergers, concrete learners and communicative learners in your class, your lecture will not prove satisfactory. Similarly, if there are any sensory specialist learners in a class and the teacher’s teaching style does not conform to their specific style, the learners will find themselves in a difficult situation and their learning will be affected. Bargar and Hoover observe that “Differences in psychological type between teachers and students can lead teachers to misunderstand learning styles of students” (1984:59). They also observe that “Conflicts in type can lead to difficulties in interpersonal communications among students and between students and teachers” (Bargar & Hoover 1984:60). A teacher, therefore, cannot remain indifferent to their students’ psychological types and learning styles. According to Harmer, teachers “have to start with the recognition of students as individuals as well as being members of a group” (2003:48). He suggests that teachers should tailor their teaching methods according to their students’ learning styles.

If there are fifty students in a class, it is very unlikely that they will have fifty different learning styles. It is also unlikely that all of them will be of the same psychological type and have a common learning style. In this case, if a teacher treats them alike and uses a generalized method of teaching, the result will not be the same to all. In this respect, Mackinnon (1978) says that “the same fire that melts the butter hardens the egg” (cited in Smith & Renzulli 1984: 44). As fire has different effects on butter and eggs, so a single teaching method will have different effects on different learners. All students in a class will not benefit equally from one method of teaching, however good that method is. So a teacher must use as many methods or styles of teaching as are possible for them. A teacher should be a versatile actor who can play different roles in different films. However, it is not possible for a teacher to use hundreds of styles. It is not necessary either. A garments factory produces just a few categories/sizes of shirts and buyers buy the category that more or less suits them. Similarly, if a teacher uses just a few styles, they will meet the demand of all students. Variety is the spice not only of life but also of a class.

To summarize my paper, a teacher has a trilateral responsibility. Firstly, they should select material which suits the level, needs, and interests of their students. Secondly, a teacher should have a thorough knowledge about their students. Apart from their needs and interests, a teacher should also study their learning style preferences. And thirdly, a teacher should match their teaching style with students’ learning style. Individualized teaching is the best but it is practically impossible. In that case a teacher can think of dividing their learners’ learning styles into several categories and then they can tailor their teaching styles on the basis of those categories. Only a matching of teaching and learning style can ensure an effective/optimum teaching-learning outcome.

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