Philosophical/Theoretical Approach to Teaching

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I.   What is the overall purpose of your teaching? What overall aims and goals guide and inform your work as an educator in postsecondary contexts?

Brookfield (2013) repeats a mantra to himself daily, and that mantra is, "To teach is to help someone learn" (p. 14). In essence what he is saying is that if there is no one who is learning, then he is not really teaching. This simple phrase has shaken my world a bit during this semester. To teach is not to cover curriculum, to lead students through experiences, nor is it to assign work. To teach is to help someone to learn. As educators, we must ensure that the teaching we desire to do is what our students can learn. They must learn if we are to be called teachers.

Therefore, the purpose of my teaching is to determine need in my students, to help students to see the knowledge gap between where they are and where they can end up, and then to help them make it to the other side of the chasm. The aims and goals that guide this are those that are firmly grounded in the research of student motivation and a belief that students do enter our classrooms with a desire for knowledge. Of course, all students come with varying degrees of that desire, but to want to know - curiosity - is an innate characteristic that we can capitalize on as educators.

Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, and Norman (2010) said, "The importance of motivation, in the context of learning, cannot be overstated, (Ames, 1990)" (p. 69). Helping students to see the value of the work they are doing, coupled with a supportive environment are two important factors in motivating students to have engagement and ownership of their own learning (p. 81). If students are engaging in and owning their learning, then I am teaching. The

purpose of my teaching is to teach. Therefore I must ensure that I am doing all I can to ensure my students are learning.

In addition to seeing the need in my own eyes for my students' learning, one of the big goals of my teaching is that my students will be capable of continuing to grow even once our time is concluded. In order to do that, I need to ensure that my students have adequate models of what good teaching looks like and does not look like, that they know how good instruction should sound, that they have ample opportunity to practice and reflect on instructional methods themselves while within the course. Scaffolding experiences for students to be able to self-assess their own growth will help them to be independent learners working towards expertise in the field. Offering ample opportunities will help ensure they can continue down the path in the correct direction, even once the course is concluded.

Ambrose et al. wrote of the importance of self-assessment. They wrote, "...Instructors can play a critical role in helping students develop the metacognitive skills that they need to succeed in college: assessing the task at hand, evaluating one's own strengths and weaknesses, planning, monitoring performance along the way, and reflecting on one's overall success" (p. 216). There is an adage that the best teachers are the ones who teach themselves out of being needed. While I don't particularly agree that this is true, there is definite value in developing in students understanding of content as well as self-assessment strategies.

In my own practice I can ensure that my purpose of teaching is clear by assessing the needs of my students upon the beginning of the workshop. I can do this through inventories, interviews, and questionnaires. I can then tailor my instruction to the needs of the individuals in the room. When considering how to provide opportunities for ownership, that comes through a number of experiences I can build in for guided practice, viewing good models, reading scripts

of excellent mentors, crafting lessons with a partner and with scaffolds in place, and offer plenty of opportunity for reflection.

II. What is the nature of your learners? What are the most salient characteristics or attributes of your learners that are important to consider in developing and facilitating educational programs for them?

The students who come to teaching workshops are generally people who want to learn. They are individuals who have education as one of the priorities in their lives. Because they value learning, and often they understand the nuances of creating learning experiences, one of the very important characteristics of my learners to consider is that they need to feel that they are truly valued for what they are bringing to the learning. Brookfield (2013) said, "One thing that marks adult teaching differently is an intense focus on the diverse experiences learners bring to the classroom" (p. 19). Acknowledging and drawing upon the previous experiences of my learners is very important in facilitating educational programs for them. That helps to create a shared-power balance between facilitator and students. When the learners know that they are valued for their backgrounds, experiences, and cognitive power, they will learn better.

According to The National Institute of Education's report:

There is now a good deal of research evidence to suggest that the more time and effort students invest in the learning process and the more intensely they engage in their own education, the greater will be their growth and achievement, their satisfaction with their educational experiences, and their persistence in college, and the more likely they are to continue their learning. (p. 17)

In other words, entering a workshop acknowledging that the participants are bringing a lot to the table will, in fact, help them to learn and grow more than if I enter as an instructor who wants to just teach what I want them to learn.

A second piece of that is that based on their prior experiences - participants may want different things. Offering some choice about the learning can be very important to helping these learners to learn. Both of these things work to demonstrate that the participants have knowledge that we are looking to build on, and not to replace.

This importance of acknowledging previous knowledge as well as holding the belief about the learners that they truly do also want to create new learning for themselves will have a positive impact on the learning experiences. Weimer (2013) said, "Having some control also affects how students learn the material. It makes it easier to connect with the content, see its relevance, and to want to apply what's being learned" (p. 97). These two principles are significant when considering the nature of the teachers, people who have spent their lives in classrooms with students and have a variety of stories to share, teaching tools in their toolboxes, and routines that work well with certain students, as learners.

III. What is the nature of knowledge? Within your particular practice context, what does it mean to know?

What does it mean to know? What does it mean to learn. In his book in which he proposes a rewrite of the mission and purpose of higher education into a learning paradigm, Tagg (2003) cites John Biggs (1999) to say:

Learning is… a way of interacting with the world. As we learn, our conceptions of phenomena change, and we see the world differently. The acquisition of information in itself does not bring about such a change, but the way we structure that information and

think with it does. Thus, education is about conceptual change, not just the acquisition of information (p. 13). (p. 62)

The nature of knowledge, then, is to gather information that is meaningful, and also to have enough context to structure that information in meaningful ways for the situations in which one would need the material. Tagg argues that knowledge is purposeful if it is useful in facilitating change, and it is not useful if it is merely in existence for its own purpose.

In other words, students are not vessels to be filled. Weimer (2013) speaks to this same value of being able to use information as an indication of knowledge. She said, "The amount of knowledge available, along with its easy access, means learners need to develop information management skills" (p. 121). Much like Tagg, Weimer says that students must be taught to use the knowledge that they are creating.

Later, Weimer (2013) says that a good teacher creates learning experiences for students to make meaning on their own, thus, helping students to construct their own meaning through learning experiences. She outlined that a good learning experience should meet the following criteria: it motivates participants, is real work of the discipline, takes students to a new place of competence and develops new content knowledge (p. 79).

In my context, this means that merely lecturing to teachers about strategies and techniques related to literacy practices is fairly meaningless. Filling their brains with model videos, articles of philosophy behind a workshop model of instruction, and taking quizzes about the order of a minilesson will produce very little meaning in their lives and therefore is fairly useless knowledge. In order for the teachers to know the topic of instruction, they must also practice with it. They must try. They must critique. They must do. As Weimer (2013) so eloquently stated, "Aim not to cover content, but to uncover part of it" (p. 117).

IV. How do students in your context learn? What are the processes that characterize their learning? How do you know if they have learned what you want them to learn?

Like in so many other areas, students in my context learn by doing. As defined in the sections above, knowledge is not truly gained unless students are participants in outlining what they want to learn, are motivated to gain knowledge, and are actively doing something with the learning to construct meaning for themselves. Thus, when considering how students in the context of teaching learn, they learn by teaching.

In a literacy workshop, the learning might look like this. The day would begin with a reflection tool for participants to self-assess their own knowledge of the teaching strategy. Then I would provide modeling for the teachers how a basic lesson would look and invite the participants to construct a similar lesson. Next, the participants would be given opportunities to practice teaching that lesson to a partner and would have a little time for reflection. After that, the partners would receive scenario cards in which they are invited to create a literacy lesson for the specific situation outlined. Each of those lessons would be similar to the one they just practiced with, but would include a slight variation to allow the teachers to rehearse a slightly different literacy lesson. The partners could then match with another partnership and rehearse the lesson in the group of four. This would again be followed with a time of reflection and summary as a whole workshop group.

The workshop outlined above follows along with the learning paradigm philosophy of teaching by John Barr and Tagg (1995) in which students work, "to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, to make students members of communities of learners that make discoveries and solve problems" (p. 15).

The processes that characterize the learning are those that are very learner-centered because the students and their understanding is the focus. Additionally, the content serves as a vehicle for student learning and not the end goal, and the students own an amount of choice within each activity of the day.

Assessing if students have learned what the goals were at the outset of a workshop can be done through self- and peer-assessments. Since workshop participants do not receive a grade, their learning is of utmost importance and providing feedback to participants is far more important than grading (McKeachie, 2014, p. 83). Depending on the duration of the workshop, the feedback could look different. If the workshop were a one or two day only learning experience, the feedback would be mostly self-reflection questions that would invite participants to think about what they learned, how their new learning added to what they already knew, what some next steps might be as learners, and would include some self-reflection rubrics demonstrating the literacy instruction practices we studied.

If the workshop were to be extended over a school year, I would continue with each of the above components, but would also add in some learning labs in which the other members of the group could go in and watch one another teach and offer feedback in that way as well. McKeachie says, peer feedback "fosters a sense of community" (p. 122) and can be a very powerful and positive experience with growing as a teacher. Also, a line in the definition of the apprenticeship perspective of teaching is that the content a person wishes to learn, "Cannot be learned in any authentic way if it is abstracted or removed from the place of its application, that is, its context" (Pratt, 1998, p. 44). Therefore, going into classrooms to watch other teachers teach is a powerful way to help one another transfer knowledge to the place where it needs to be applied.

V. What is your role as the teacher in helping your students learn? Given what you believe about the purpose of teaching, the nature of your learners, and the learning process, what strategies or methods are most appropriate for your settings?

My role as a teacher in helping students learn is to do the things for them that are difficult for them to do themselves. Students learn best when they are working on real world tasks (Ambrose et al, 2010, p. 83), when they are taking time to reflect on their learning (McKeachie, 2014, p. 294) and when they are engaged in learning that is constructed specifically for their needs (Weimer, 2013, p. 238) and have an ultimate goal for which they are designed (Wiggins, 2012).

In all of the models we studied this semester, all of the instructors spent a considerable amount of time before the class arrived preparing for the scenarios the class would work in that day or unit. For example, Brookfield took great care to construct discussion protocols so that students would have a balanced opportunity to share thinking with one another. Weimer went so far as to create a student-centered activity around the distribution of the course syllabus, something most professors do almost in passing. Each of these examples demonstrate a firm commitment to putting all students as a priority in the learning environment. By taking the time to construct scenarios, it demonstrates to the students that they are important enough to do that for, it creates environments very conducive to specific learning, and helps create class culture - all of which are meaningful to a learning community.

Spending similar time constructing scenarios for teachers to work within in a workshop will have equally positive payoff. Knowing that the teachers I work with value learning and will gain the most out of working in real-world scenarios, giving them ample opportunity to practice teaching with the real content they will be teaching is important. I like to refer to this as the fact

that every one of my trainings has a 'make and take' component to it. The teachers are motivated to learn when they can walk out the door with something they can use in their actual classroom.

Another consistency throughout the readings this semester was the use and importance of metacognition for students. This is another thing, in addition to setting up learning scenarios, that is difficult for students to commit to setting aside time to do for themselves. Therefore, it is another learning strategy that is important that I include in my workshops. As Ambrose (2010) states, teaching students to be metacognitive learners is a very important part of the learning process (p. 216). Offering time for meaningful reflection after activities in which new learning is experienced is time well spent. Students will learn more once they've processed what they just learned. Since the workshops I instruct are often at the end of a workday so the participants are already tired, or take place in the summer which is months away from the implementation of the ideas, metacognitive writing is especially important. Offering teachers time to reflect on their learning and to plan for the use of the knowledge they gain is important to the implementation of that information.

Doing those two hard things - creating scenarios in which teachers are working with their actual content, and using time to be metacognitive, help the teachers to be better teachers, which in turn helps me to be a better teacher too.

In conclusion, teaching is done when students are learning. The more I can do as a teacher to ensure that students are actually learning, the more I am teaching. That makes my life pretty meaningful.

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