Six Questions That Will Bring Your Teaching Philosophy into Focus

By: Neil Haave, PhD in Philosophy of Teaching

Earlier this year, a couple of contributions to The Teaching Professor (Haave 2014) and Faculty Focus (Weimer 2014) discussed the place of learning philosophies in our teaching. The online comments to Weimer’s blog post (2014) made me think more about how we as instructors need to be careful to bridge instructivist and constructivist teaching approaches for students not yet familiar with taking responsibility for their own learning (Venkatesh et al 2013).

Students still seem to equate lectures with better learning/teaching as opposed to student-centered teaching strategies despite the preponderance of evidence to the contrary. This preference is confirmed for me when I review the end-of-term student evaluations for the courses in which I use team-based learning (TBL) – an active learning strategy if there ever was one. But what is really interesting is that there is a seeming sweet spot. For those courses in which I used TBL all of the time, student evaluations requested more lecturing. In contrast, in the one course in which I used TBL for only a couple of course sections, students indicated that a bit more TBL would be appreciated. Perhaps what I need to consider is varying the teaching strategy I use (Venkatesh et al 2013) taking into account the need to bridge post-secondary students’ transition from pedagogical to andragogical learning (Grow 1991).

What I particularly like in Grow’s article (1991) is his assertion that good teaching responds to the needs of the student — in his words, it is situational. My question then is, how do instructors make their teaching situational to an entire class? An entire class will contain a large continuum between students needing pedagogical vs. andragogical learning strategies. How do we respond to all of these different needs and the existing continuum in learning approaches (Knowles 1990)?

How we learn informs how we teach
I wonder if how we teach might be improved by considering how we ourselves learn (Weimer
I sometimes find that, as an instructor, I forget what it was like to learn an idea or concept for the first time. I forget that much of how I view/interpret new ideas is informed by the experiences and ideas I have already encountered and that this may be relatively limited for students.

One of the tasks I most enjoyed while serving as associate dean of teaching at the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta was to help new instructors and teaching award nominees develop their teaching philosophy by helping them make the connection between personal learning experiences and the reasons for using a particular teaching approach.

What I have come to realize is that how we learn can inform how we teach and perhaps help us to bridge the development of students from a young to adult learning approach. One strategy I used to help initiate the process was to have colleagues link their teaching philosophy to concrete experiences they had as a student and how that manifests itself now in their own teaching. A common approach I employed was to ask fellow instructors to describe an exemplary learning experience from their past and to explain what made it particularly significant for them. I would then ask them to consider how that learning experience informed their own teaching and if it had not, why not? Subsequently I would have them consider an exemplary teaching experience they had with their students and ask how that informed their teaching philosophy. Should it? Why or why not? How does the teaching philosophy manifest itself in the teaching strategies that you use?

Both exemplary and deeply unsatisfying learning/teaching experiences can be used to develop learning and teaching philosophies because each will say something about how we prefer to learn and what teaching practices we and our students have found to be successful.

The learning experience that I always return to for myself is the introductory biochemistry lecture I attended in the second year of my undergraduate degree in which my instructor explained the responsiveness of hemoglobin to the oxygen and pH environment of our tissues and lungs, and how the protein’s shape changed and thereby impacted its affinity for oxygen. At that moment, it became clear to me that our breathing process is mirrored by the protein’s conformational changes as it bound and then released oxygen in response to the acidity of the environment (it’s more complicated than that, but this will suffice for this example). It then dawned on me that the protein, in a sense, breathes and is by no means a static structure as was depicted in textbooks (this was in the early 1980s). It was then that I knew I wanted to study biochemistry, because it had become a dynamic process worthy of investigation and understanding.

How has that impacted my teaching philosophy? As a teacher, I want to create learning environments that are fertile ground for those sorts of “aha!” moments for my students. I want to create the conditions in my classroom that will enable students to come to their own realization that molecular cell biology, biochemistry, and histology are dynamic engaging processes that inspire fascination and curiosity. I want them to become the type of students whose reasons for learning go beyond the desire for a passing grade. Thus my guiding
principle, which has led me to try and master team-based learning, is to consider how to create a learning environment inside my classroom that will entice students to be eager to learn on their own and to always be asking “How does this work?”. I try to find problems to set the table for learning. Or rather, I till the field and plant the seeds of interest waiting for the students to tend their garden in anticipation of what knowledge they will grow.

Examining our teaching philosophies
Below is a set of questions that I have used in workshops on developing teaching philosophies. There are no correct answers, but there are answers that are better supported than others. The intent of the exercise is to build, articulate, and be explicit about our reasons for teaching the way we do, as advocated by Girash (2014). Eventually, our teaching philosophies need to be made manifest in our students’ learning outcomes and, it seems to me, mindful of individual students’ learning philosophies. We need to ask ourselves, ‘What is the evidence that how we teach is successful?’

These questions are best answered in conversation with a colleague or two.

1. **Describe the best learning experience you have had as a student.** *(This helps to identify how we best learn and reminds us as instructors what it is like to be a student. Maryellen Weimer (2013) recently discussed this in the context of influencing the learning environment)*

2. **Describe the best teaching experience you have had as an instructor.** Are there any similarities to the learning experience you described above? *(This question attempts to link our learning to our teaching.)*

3. **What are you trying to achieve in your students with your teaching?** *(This is a big question and may be best initially answered by thinking about it in the context of what you feel is the course you teach with the most success.)*

4. **Why is this important to you?** *(This helped me to begin articulating my approach to my discipline in the context of teaching. For others I know it becomes larger than the discipline itself and may link to the personal growth of students and not only their intellectual growth.)*

5. **How do you achieve your objectives you wrote down for question #3 above?** That is, what teaching strategies or approaches do you use in your classes that produce the learning environment or opportunities for your students to reach your teaching objectives? *(Hopefully, this has been informed by your answers in questions #1 & 2 above. If there is no apparent connection between this question and your answers to #1 & 2, then this might be cause to pause and reflect why this is.)*

6. **Why do you use these particular teaching strategies as opposed to others that are available to you?** *(This is where you start developing the argument or citing the evidence for the value or success of your approach to teaching. Hopefully, you are able to make links to your own learning philosophy.)*
These questions have helped me and others to develop our teaching philosophies. They can be strengthened with regular revision and grounding them in questions of philosophy (Beatty et al 2009). Considering our teaching philosophies in the context of our own and our students’ learning philosophies has the potential to help us, as instructors, aid our students’ development from dependent to independent learners.

So, how does your learning philosophy inform your teaching philosophy? And how does that manifest in the teaching strategies that you have chosen to use in your classes?

References:


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