MY PHILOSPHY OF EDUCATION

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Eoin Parle
eoin.parle@gmit.ie

ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this paper is to focus on my own preferred teaching methods in order to analyse and elucidate my own educational philosophy. Settling on an educational philosophy that suits your style as an educator is important. It enables you to articulate your own views and experiences of learning, your professional values, beliefs and goals. Reflection on this topic is highly important to develop as an educator.

In this review, I examine several educational theory methods that are close to my heart in terms of my approach to teaching. I review two of my own personal favourite philosophies, namely the student-led approaches of humanism used by Maria Montessori and Carl Rogers, and constructivism used famously by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, as well as looking briefly at behaviourism such as that used by Ivan Pavlov and B.F Skinner. It seems I have followed many of these student-led approaches during my teaching career often without fully realising. I have found that "learning by doing" works wonders for actively engaging students in their own education, giving them ownership over material covered in class. I have found these approaches extremely useful in developing students' confidence in their own ability to learn as well as instilling curiosity and a joy in learning.

Below, I review several resources on philosophers that championed these educational styles and how well they worked for their students in my literature review. In my discussion I highlight why these styles work for me, and how they lead me to develop my own teaching philosophy.

KEYWORDS:

Teaching Philosophy, Humanism, Constructivism, Scaffolding, Zone of Proximal Development

INTRODUCTION:

It is common for a third level lecturer to start teaching with little or no teaching experience, very little knowledge regarding what teaching styles and philosophies they are best suited to use, and even less may be known about teaching methods for effective knowledge transfer to their students. Indeed, due to lack of experience or practice, many might be more concerned with getting through course material rather than how it is received. The approach of the lecturer talking, writing or performing all the activities while the students passively learn has been shown to be ineffective.

Educational Theory and its application is a field that can support educators at all levels to become more self-aware, more student-aware and to become more effective at their jobs. The first step towards gaining a knowledge of learning is to examine the theory behind learning. There are a myriad of approaches and theories one can follow. This paper will focus on analysing the teaching methods most applicable to my own teaching style and personal preferences – humanism and constructivism. It is my belief that students learn best when they are not only actively engaged, but are effectively educating themselves through a (directed) process of discovery. Instilling the joy of learning in a student is a gift they can nurture both inside and outside of an educational environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Humanism:

"*Do not tell them how to do it. Show them how to do it. If you tell them, they watch your lips move. If you show them, they will want to do it themselves*" – **Maria Montessori.**

"*Growth occurs when individuals confront problems, struggle to master them, and through that struggle develop new aspects of their skills, capacities, views about life*" – **Carl Rogers**.

The Montessori Method is a well-known humanist education method most widely known in Ireland for its application in pre-schools, crèches, and "Montessori" schools for children between the ages of 3-5. They encourage children to "learn by discovering" (Montessori, 2013) and focus more on physical skills (e.g. fastening buttons, putting pegs in a peg board, putting on your own coat etc.) rather than rote learning of numbers or letters. The activities the child engages with are designed to be attractive, fun and more like the outside world rather than the traditional classroom (UK Essays, 2018). Often there is no "right" way of doing these activities and the children enjoy the freedom to discover learn at their own pace and develop skills with minimal intervention or direction. Montessori observed that "education is not what the teacher gives; education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual, and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiences upon the environment. The task of the teacher becomes that of

preparing a series of motives of cultural activity, spread over a specially prepared environment, and then refraining from obtrusive interference" (Montessori, 1946). Observing the success of this method, Montessori managed to adapt the traditional teacher-taught subjects of the required primary age curriculum of the Italian education system to allow children to use materials to "take the lead" (Olaf, 2020). This allowed children to follow their own interests in an open-ended research style, and provided with guidance from the educator, it was found many children grasped a deep knowledge of academic subjects not traditionally taught until much later, working to a level not commonly accepted as possible for a "younger mind". Although associated with pre-school children, Maria Montessori also developed programs of study for children of all ages (ranging from 0-18 in 4 distinct programs) (Olaf, 2020). She found that observation of (and working together with) peers could often lead to better results than the traditional teacher-led approach.

Another humanist educational theorist Carl Rogers continued this idea of self-led learning throughout childhood and into university settings (Rogers, 1969). His "person-centred" approach was designed to align the ideal self with the person's own self-image and self-worth regardless of age or ability. He saw himself as a facilitator (more so than an educator) who created an environment to allow education to occur through student engagement (UK Essays, 2018). This aligns well with Maria Montessori's teaching practices.

Constructivism:

"*What a child can do today with assistance, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow*" – **Leo Vygostsky**.

"*When you teach a child something you take away forever his chance of discovering it for himself*" – **Jean Piaget.**

The definition of constructivism is 'an approach to learning that holds that people actively construct or make their own knowledge and that reality is determined by the experiences of the learner' (Elliot et al., 2000). One of the main contributors to this teaching philosophy is Jean Piaget. He used the cognitive based approach to analyse children's developmental stages. He stated that learning is a search for meaning, is self-directed and active: "*The principle goal of education in the schools should be creating men and women who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done"* (Logue, 2019). There are four cornerstones to constructivism (McLeod, 2019).

The first is that knowledge is "constructed" – learners build new knowledge upon a foundation of what is already known. Similar to constructing a house or a wall, to build a new layer of knowledge, the layer underneath must be strong or "steady". Prior knowledge will influence new or modified knowledge that the learner gets from learning experiences. The learner's stage of development as well as prior education can influence this foundation.

The second cornerstone is that knowledge is not passively absorbed, where the learner is "an empty vessel" to be filled with new knowledge, but rather meaning and knowledge can only be constructed by active engagement by the learner – they build or construct it themselves. To be clear, the student need not figure out everything from scratch themselves, and information may be passively received, but for true understanding to take place the student makes connections between prior knowledge and new knowledge. For example: building a piece of equipment from a kit using a sheet of instructions (e.g. a model airplane or some IKEA furniture). The sheet of instructions may be read by the student. They can observe known objects (screws, panels, spanners etc.) and reading the instructions may help form some idea of the learning experience. *This* is information being *passively* received. For true learning and understanding to take place, the student must follow the instructions, physically putting the pieces together, and learning as they go as to how to connect them, arrange them etc. The act of assembly makes meaningful connections between old and new knowledge, helping the student learn and develop a new skill.

The third cornerstone is that learning is a social activity. Rather than learning in isolation, for a student to flourish, they are helped or facilitated by their peers or an educator. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) comes into play here. Often there may be a small step or a big leap between what is known and what is not known. The educator can provide "scaffolding" for a student to progress from one stage to the next to lead them through this zone of proximal development. This could be in the form of verbal assistance, demonstration or using the example above – providing the assembly instructions to the student (without which the task of assembly would be extremely difficult for a novice). The scaffolding or support can be reduced gradually as the student becomes more comfortable with the skill or knowledge, eventually being withdrawn completely.

The fourth cornerstone is that learning is personal. This is more of a warning to educators that not every student will take home the same message or have the same learning experience, and this is largely based on their stage of development and the prior knowledge that forms the foundation for the new learning experiences. Some students respond to different stimuli – some may prefer visual / audio to traditional text. Some may flourish when learning alone rather in the classroom. Skills are developed in different ways and at different rates depending on the student.

Behaviourism:

Behaviourism is a completely different teaching approach that is widely used across the Irish education system. Its champions include B.F. Skinner and Ivan Pavlov. They used a variety of approaches to show that how we learn can be based on a variety of controlling stimuli such as rewards and punishments. Many of the theories of behaviourism were developed from observing animal behaviour. For instance the "Pavlov's Dog" experiment where a dog can be conditioned to salivate upon hearing a bell if the dog is taught to

associate the sound of the bell with receiving food (Pavlov, 1955). Skinner showed that rodents could be trained to perform tasks based on rewards (food) and punishments (shocks) (McLeod 2018). These theorists helped to shed light on how and why we learn based on our instincts and how reinforcement (positive and negative) and repetition can be used to successfully impart knowledge and skills, as well as modify behaviour.

Discussion:

Both humanist and constructivist based teaching philosophies rely heavily on student-led and self-directed learning. Educators may be at odds to work this method into their classrooms for a curriculum that has traditionally used teacher led or passive learning styles for educating. However, Montessori and Rogers have shown both traditional primary school and third level curricula can be adapted for this teaching style. There are definitely some challenges. The main criticism these methods have received is that they lack structure or they are unpredictable, but if the teacher acts more like a collaborator or a facilitator who provides scaffolding for active problem solving, I believe these methods are extremely effective. It is often necessary to cover a lot of theory in a module but this theory can be used as the scaffolding by the educator which is then used to impart knowledge or develop new skills by active engagement or problem solving. There may also be a challenge for the students who are more used to rote learning and regurgitation to adapt to this learning style. These teaching philosophies really appeal to me as an educator. They are in stark opposition to the behaviourist philosophy where knowledge is transferred from teacher to learner with rewards used to reinforce “good behaviour" (UK Essays, 2018). In the humanist method, the knowledge and the education *is* the reward.

I find the constructivist approach very rewarding and try to use this approach with my own children for example when making puzzles. In the past, when my son was stuck, instead of handing him the correct piece, and saying “try this piece”, I encouraged him to look at the unfinished jigsaw puzzle, for example saying “what do you see in this piece?” – a fire engine – “try to find more pieces of this fire engine”. He would then search the loose pieces, find what he wanted and try connect this to the puzzle. This use of scaffolding here worked brilliantly. Originally I showed him how to do it, talking through my thought processes. Then I used the questions (such as that mentioned above) while he performed the actions. Now he uses the same thought process and observation / searching technique himself unaided to complete old and new jigsaws. It is a rewarding process for everyone involved.

While the behaviourist theories I touched on earlier cannot be disputed, and can definitely be applied to human education and learning, I have always felt that using this educational style is more akin to “training” rather than educating. The same motivations that can be seen experimentally in animals (fear of punishments, desire for rewards and response to conditioning) drive us as learners. Rote learning and

repetition has its place in the education system, and is definitely successful – it is how most adults learned their multiplication tables – I think it has been over-used in our education system. I certainly encountered it a lot during my first and second level education. I feel that especially in a third level setting, the more student-led discovery approach is preferable.

Conclusion

Bringing the constructivist approach into my teaching is something I have always done often without being aware of it. I build on students' prior knowledge – using examples in my teaching of something everyone will understand – e.g. complex concepts like chemical reactions, solutions and diffusion can be illustrated using practical examples that everyone can relate to such as dissolving sugar in a cup of tea, drying clothes on a clothesline, the falling of dew during the summer etc. Explaining the science of what is happening in these situations can help students grasp a new idea or concept much more easily. It is rewarding to enable a student to think about something they take for granted in a completely new light. Every-day tasks used as examples in class can act as reinforcements when the student experiences them again outside the classroom, the new knowledge bringing them joy. This is how I use the constructivist approach.

In terms of using a student-led approach, I have learned a wealth of new techniques on this Teaching and Learning course to enable me to create an environment in my classroom where students expect to be actively engaged in some form or other throughout each and every lesson I give. Techniques such as "think-pair-share", breaking the class into groups where each group can work on a bite-size portion of a topic, having groups create mind-maps, give short presentations, construct "jigsaws", create their own exam and assessment questions, peer reviewing, peer assignment correction and discussion are now common place in my lessons and I have found them very rewarding and received much positive feedback from my students.

My Teaching Philosophy:

At the centre of my teaching philosophy is the student led approach. I act as a facilitator to shine a light on my students' ability to lead their own learning experience. I use the constructivist methods of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development to build on their prior knowledge. I get great satisfaction from my role as a mentor by fostering students' curiosity and joy in learning. My main aim as an educator is to give confidence to my students to self-direct their education and become masters in their chosen fields. This is something I hope they will carry with them beyond the education system and into their daily lives.

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