

PHILOSOPHY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

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The following ten propositions outline my current beliefs about the teaching/learning process.

1. Reality is objective.

The starting point for my philosophy of teaching is that there is in fact an objective “reality.” I would not subscribe to a radical form of relativism which asserts that truth or reality are *merely* human constructs and which thus denies the essential fact of objective truth *outside* of this human construction. In the words of the old *X-Files* television show, “The truth is out there.”

2. Knowledge is socially constructed.

None of us, as individuals, has full and complete access to objective reality. None of us has what we might call a “God’s eye view” on truth. We have the ability to attempt to understand objective reality, and we can have confidence that such attempts, when diligently pursued, will produce meaningful results. However, this pursuit of knowledge is conducted under the influence of our interpersonal interactions, within the sphere of the communities in which we live and work and learn. It is within the matrix of those interactions that we come to “know” what is real and beautiful and good. Our knowledge is thus socially constructed in the context of our communities. Thus, for example, the fact that some humans are female and some humans are male is an objective reality, but what it means to be a woman or to be a man is determined by the knowledge construction of the community or communities in which we take part.

This means that our perception of objective reality can only take place through the lens of our culture (with culture understood as operating at multiple levels – ethnic, geographical region, profession, etc.). I would not, however, take this so far as to say that a single individual living alone on the proverbial desert island could not have any knowledge. Human beings have the capacity to generate knowledge as individuals. But, at the same time, we are inescapably social beings, and as long as we have social interactions, our knowledge of the world around us will be inevitably influenced by the communities in which we participate.

3. Meaning is intended.

In distinction from the above point, I prefer *not* to say that “meaning” is socially constructed. Each of us has the right to make meaning through a variety of expressions, and the meaning of each of those expressions is what we intend it to mean. Meaning is thus found in the intent of the subject (the author, or artist, etc.). The meaning of *Great Expectations* is whatever Dickens intended. My *knowledge* of the meaning of *Great Expectations* will be influenced by my community, of course. But Dickens gets to decide what the meaning is; my community doesn’t.

4. Learning is the development of new modes of belief, thought or behavior, resulting from processed experience.

This is a definition that I developed several years ago, but after taking a number of courses in this program it still seems to fit. Four aspects of this definition seem particularly important. First, learning is about change. If the learner doesn’t undergo some change, then she hasn’t actually learned. Second, learning is holistic. Learning is not simply the accumulation of ideas, but could take place in the realms of attitudes, values, or behavior, as well. Third, experience is the essential means of learning. In line with Dewey (1938), I want to recognize that learning flows out of and back into the normal flow of life experience. Fourth, for experience to generate learning, there must be some kind of “processing” of that experience on the part of the learner. It is possible to go through an experience without learning, so for experience to be “activated” for the benefit of learning, some sort of reflective process is necessary.

5. Different communities generate different knowledge frameworks.

Continuing from point #2 above, if knowledge is socially constructed by a given community, it seems unavoidable that different communities could, and most certainly do, generate different frameworks of knowledge. At the most expansive level, of course, we refer to these knowledge frameworks as “worldviews.” Even within a similar worldview, however, different communities may have differently nuanced frameworks of knowledge (so that a Vietnamese-American community and a Cambodian-American community might well have distinct senses of what they “know” to be true).

This proposition implies a need for humility, respect, and dialogical learning from one another. We need humility, because we have to acknowledge that our view on reality is not the only possible (or only legitimate) view. We need to show respect, because other communities may have knowledge which we don’t have, and even if we do not accept the validity of their perspective, we ought to respect their right to construct knowledge and be committed to it. Finally, we ought to engage in dialogue to learn from other knowledge communities.

6. Each individual learner represents multiple overlapping knowledge communities.

We each live at the intersection of multiple communities. As such, we participate in overlapping and intersecting communities of knowledge construction, and draw from them all to create our own unique individual perspectives. Thus, each learner should be respected for her individuality, and also prized for the way in which she provides an opportunity to access the knowledge in each community she represents.

7. Learning happens best in the relational context of community.

In EDAE 624, my reflection paper on Palmer (1998) and the course as a whole led me to the conclusion that “greater effectiveness in learning will result when learning is understood and practiced as situated in the context of a community.” In a sense then, the ideal is for the learning environment to become a “meta-community,” a community where individuals – themselves representing diverse communities of knowledge – meet and interact. In this “community of communities” the individual participants can introduce insights from their respective knowledge communities as the learning community synthesizes and integrates these insights in its own fresh construction of knowledge.

8. The immediate objective of learning is expanding human capabilities.

Here I am intentionally using the language of Sen (1999). Sen uses this language to refer to “the alternative combinations of functionings [which Sen defines as “the various things a person may value doing or being”] that are feasible for her to achieve” (p. 75). Simply put, a “capability” is the capacity to be or do something that the subject finds valuable. However, I like using this language because of the connection with Sen’s work and his definition of poverty as “capability deprivation.” This language thus allows us to situate adult learning in the context of international development discourse.

9. The ultimate objective of learning is “responsible well-being”

I draw here on another development thinker in Chambers (1997). I appreciate Chambers’ description of “responsible well-being by and for all” (p. 11) as the objective for development. Chambers describes this responsible well-being as a web connecting responsible well-being with capabilities, livelihood security, equity, and sustainability (pp. 9-11). Other language that might be used is the term “human flourishing” or the Hebrew concept of “shalom.” What is important to me is that the idea of social justice is integrated into our understanding of well-being, and Chambers’ model seems to do that.

10. Teaching is facilitating the process of learning for an individual or group.

Teaching, then, is ultimately about helping an individual or group of learners to engage with objective reality through an experience or set of experiences, and then – in the context of their community (or meta-community) – to reflectively process that experience to construct new beliefs, knowledge, and behaviors.

Ultimately, I would like to refer to this philosophy of teaching/learning as a type of “critical progressivism.” It is essentially a progressive philosophy of education because of its emphasis on learning through experience for practical problem-solving that promotes societal well-being (Zinn, 2004). However, it is “critical” in two senses. First, it is critical in the sense of “critical realism,” a philosophical approach referred to by theologian N.T. Wright. Wright (1992) presents this as a balance of objective and subjective approaches, which I have tried to capture in my first three propositions. Wright puts it this way:

This is a way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence ‘realism’), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence ‘critical’). (Wright, 1992, p. 35).

This approach of “critical progressivism” is also critical in the same sense of “critical race theory” – always keeping an eye on power relations. If the outcome of learning is responsible well-being, and this includes a core element of equity and social justice, then issues of equity and attention to power must be incorporated throughout the entire teaching/learning process.

Of course, this statement of ten propositions outlining my philosophy is necessarily provisional and incomplete. This represents my “best efforts,” given my current understanding of the adult learning process, to present my own philosophy. Undoubtedly this philosophy will continue to grow and develop (*semper reformanda*) over the course of this program, as my own knowledge gets constructed through critical and creative dialogue with my instructors and peers.

References

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