

THE TEACHING PROCESS: AN INTERACTION OF EXPERIENCE, THEORY, AND REFLECTION

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Teaching is a process, not a product and as such, it develops and changes over time. All teachers change with their experiences in and out of the classroom. However, not all teachers grow in their craft. Growth comes with their experiences and new theory and critical reflection upon both. As an illustration of this process, I would like to share some of my experiences and reflections and the theory that has guided them. To assist the reader in distinguishing among these interactive parts of the teaching process, the experiences are in standard print and the related theory is in *italics*. Critical reflections on the process are found at the conclusion of the article.

I was a secondary Family and Consumer Sciences teacher for sixteen years. During that time, I taught many different courses – personal development, parenting, life planning – but primarily I taught nutrition and fitness to approximately one hundred students per semester. My principal objective for these students was the acquisition of knowledge necessary for them to recognize and meet their nutritional needs. The students were presented with the most current nutritional information and were challenged with course content related to human nutrition, physiology, and food science. As I reflect upon my teaching practice in the first ten years of my career, I would describe myself as a very good technical teacher. I provided my students with the facts and information necessary for solving problems related to nutrition.

In technical education, the teacher is seen as the provider of knowledge. The student receives the “truth” from the experts ---- in this case, the teacher and the text. The teacher decides what information and facts are important for the students to know. Plans are then made to give that information to the student and provide ways for the students to use and remember it. The focus is on knowledge and skill, the “how to” actions (Wilkosz, 1983). Problem-solving when based on technical action, can be successful within the classroom. However, the assumption cannot be made that the students’ lives are changed because of their gained knowledge. The meaning of concepts is comprised of knowledge, its relevance, the emotional response of the learner, and the context for use of that knowledge (Caine & Caine, 1991). Meaning is constructed by the students. Jensen (1998) cautions teachers to “never assume that because something is relevant to you, it’s relevant to your students” (p. 92-93). Motivation and readiness are important factors to consider when looking at the long-term impact of technical education (Morgaine, 1992).

As I observed my classes, I began to see that some of the most important learnings were occurring in the laboratory as the students worked together to solve problems. I began to plan more experiences that required student collaboration. The students continued to receive an abundance of technical information; however, they were now processing this information in groups rather than as individuals. The student took more responsibility for their education by planning labs and helping all group members be successful.

The change in my teaching from technical to technical/communicative came at the same time a new curriculum was introduced in Ohio (Kister, Laurensen, & Boggs, 1993). The

curriculum introduced four process competencies (leadership, relating to others, balancing work and family responsibilities, and problem solving) which were to be taught in all content areas. These were effectively accomplished with my new technical/communicative approach. The process skills were built on relationships and were most effectively developed in social interactions. My technical knowledge of Family and Consumer Sciences content was no longer sufficient for my needs as a teacher. I sought out interactive teaching strategies based on the social construction of learning. Cooperative learning and group inquiry were among those strategies which I investigated.

Communicative education is based on interpretive knowledge and is “concerned with meanings and interpersonal communication of meanings” (Thomas, 1998). It recognizes the role of the student in the learning process. The teacher and student share the responsibility of learning. Everyone in the classroom exchanges understandings and experiences. “Truth” comes out of this interaction (Redick, 1995). Everyone’s experiences are valid and students are encouraged to listen to and respect the ideas of each person in the classroom. However, not all “opinions” are given equal credence. The students examine and question the ideas. As a result, students learn to give reasoned, logical arguments in order to gain respect for their ideas. Communication, empathy, and reasoning are emphasized in communicative teaching. Dialogue and mutual support are used as primary methods for communicative teaching (Morgaine, 1992).

Planning lessons with an emphasis on communicative education requires a teacher to create an atmosphere of trust so all students feel comfortable in sharing their ideas and experiences. The teacher must model the behavior that is required by encouraging students to express their ideas and responding to the ideas in a positive manner. Concerns about respect and confidentiality may also need to be addressed (Thompson, 2000).

In communicative education, the students are “active participants in considering the context of a specific problem affecting a family, the desired results, the alternatives available for problem resolution, and the potential consequences of various alternatives” (Copa & Mileham, 1998, p.40). The students may not be accustomed to taking this responsibility for their education or having the right to choose the direction in which it goes. The teacher will need to guide the students in this process by selecting relevant resources and carefully planning activities and discussion questions.

Communicative action in the classroom is cognitive reasoning. However, it is not critical thinking. “In order to be critical thinking in the strong sense, students must seek solutions to problems that require them to make value, moral, and ethical judgments” (Kowalczyk, Neels, & Sholl, 1990).

As I was beginning to gain confidence in my new role of technical/communicative teacher, I was introduced to a new concept, that of critical-emancipatory education. As I learned more about this concept, I could feel myself drawing a mental line and saying, “NO! I am not a political person. I am not a social activist. I barely have to time to teach the information students need to make good decisions. How could I add something else? No, I won’t do it!”

However, my stubbornness lasted for only a short period of time. Questions about the role of the critical-emancipatory teacher piqued my natural curiosity and began running through my head. “What was this “new” kind of learning? Why were people excited about it? What was the response of the students? How is it done? What would it look like in my classroom?” By

the time I got to that last question, the mental line had been erased and I was willing to try the critical-emancipatory approach.

Critical/emancipatory teaching creates an atmosphere for two things to occur in the classroom. The first is a critical investigation of the assumptions that are made about daily lives and interactions (Shor, 1987). Students learn to examine the “usual” and “expected” in terms of morality and justice. This is done through questioning. Are everyone’s rights protected? Is this action best for all concerned? What would happen if everyone chose this course of action? Whose interests are being served?

Following this critical look at an issue or concept, students are encouraged to take action. It is in this ability to act upon beliefs that students find freedom and empowerment. They take reasoned control of their lives, based upon ethical considerations of what is best for all concerned. Critical/emancipatory action is the “ability and willingness to have control over one’s own life” (Wogensen, 1989).

I examined my plans and by combining some lessons and omitting others I created a three-week block of time at the end of the semester for my experiment in critical-emancipatory education. Next, I looked at my daily lesson plans for key places to “plug-in” critical thought by adding new dimensions to existing assignments. For example, a lab-planning assignment in the past might read: “Plan an after school snack that will cost no more than \$2.00, provide 50% of your daily requirement of iron, contain no more than 4 grams of fat, and be prepared, eaten, and cleaned up in our 50 minute class period.” In order to add the dimension of critical thought to that assignment, I would add considerations of food allergies, cultural/religious food taboos, environmental issues, or social issues such as needs of latch-key children. These additions forced the students to think beyond themselves and their own personal preferences. They had to consider the impact of their actions on others.

Critical reasoning involves considerations of the moral/ethical implications of our actions. Decisions are based on moral and ethical judgments (Redick, 1995). Because adolescents are involved in the developmental tasks of creating self-identity and personal independence, their focus is upon themselves. Looking at the ethical implications of their actions upon others changes the focus of their decision making from themselves as central, to themselves as part of society. Critical/ethical thought may not be easy for adolescents. Teachers will need to lead them carefully through the process (Kurfiss, 1994).

In addition to the changes in lab assignments, I added critical questions to tests and daily work (primarily as process questions that had to be answered and given to me as an exit slip before the student left the classroom.) For example, a lesson which featured food preparation techniques was followed by questions dealing with food waste and scarcity. These questions focused on the role of power and privilege in food distribution and raised ethical considerations of justice. For example, students were asked to notice the amount of food scraps or garbage generated by their lab experience, or they were asked what they did with the food that they did not like. The students were then asked to draw an inference. What does our lack of respect for food say about our society? Would our attitude towards food be different if we had less? What is our ethical responsibility towards those who do have less?

Most relationships involve an element of power. Many of our traditions, institutions, and practices are designed to maintain the status quo. Those in our society who have power and influence want to continue the traditions and practices which support their position. Critical theory "aligns itself with marginalized, less powerful persons with the goal of transforming schools to be democratic" (McClelland, 1997, p. 165). The role of the critical-emancipatory teacher is to help students recognize these power relationships and to consider the rights of the less powerful. The teacher is a facilitator who encourages students to consider all viewpoints, raises questions which challenge students to think, and brings the discussion to closure (Kowalczyk, Neels, & Sholl, 1990). The students may then be motivated to act in such a manner as to insure that the voices of the less powerful are heard.

With the ground work for ethical action laid throughout the semester, the final project for the class was presented. The class brain-stormed a list of all the topics/concepts that had been studied by the class during the semester and a list of persons within the community who possibly did not have the nutritional information or resources to meet their own nutritional needs. Following the creations of these lists, my question was, "What is our responsibility?"

Each of my four classes agreed that we had an ethical responsibility to reach out to those in the community who were less privileged. (These are my words. The students' response was more like, "We ought to do something! What can we do?")

The classes were then divided into small groups. Each group selected a target population and made a tentative plan as to what could be done. The class as a whole then selected one of the projects to work on as a large group. Each of the four classes selected a different target population. One class selected their peers at the high school. They planned a week of nutrition education activities that included setting up computers in the cafeteria and analyzing students' lunches for nutritive content. Following the analysis, the students discussed with their peers the consequences of continuing to eat in that manner and suggested ways of changing their diet to make improvements.

A second class was concerned with the number of young children who are responsible for making their own nutrition choices. They decided to concentrate on after-school snacks that were nutritious, inexpensive, and easy to make. With the cooperation of teachers at the near-by elementary school, the class went to the school and taught a "nutritious snack" lesson, complete with a mini lab for the elementary school children.

Our community has a large mental health facility and there are many former patients living within the city limits. Because some of these former patients lack budgeting skills and have limited income, The Gathering Place, a facility which provides support and assistance, serves dinner the last week of the month for those whose money did not stretch to the final days. The third class decided to assist with this project by planning, preparing, serving, and sharing meals at The Gathering Place. Some class members felt that information on budgeting would have been more useful; however, the staff at The Gathering Place discouraged this idea. The majority of students wanted to focus on planning and preparing the meals, so I helped and encouraged the students to work in that direction.

The fourth class chose to plan and prepare meals for residents of a homeless shelter. At the request of the staff, the students brought the food to the shelter, assisted the residents in serving it, and joined them for dinner. Several of the students told me later that they were very uncomfortable eating at the shelter because they discovered that it was difficult to distinguish among staff members and the homeless. They had a stereotypical image of the homeless as

elderly, dirty, and poorly dressed. The residents of the shelter did not conform to this image. They were generally younger, cleaner, and better dressed than my students had anticipated and were similar in appearance to the shelter's staff members. The discomfort felt by the students when their assumptions did not match the reality of the shelter led to interesting class discussions of assumptions that we have about the homeless. The students developed empathy for the residents of the shelter when the students recognized the ways in which the homeless were, in many ways similar to themselves, their families, and their friends.

When students are placed into new situations, there is potential for great growth. However, teachers cannot assume that students will learn all that was intended without careful guidance on the part of the teacher. Questions for class discussions must be thoughtfully prepared. Students can be guided through and exploration of their prejudices and mind sets, into an awareness of reality as seen from another perspective. They must be encouraged to reflect upon the differences between their ideals and the reality of their everyday life (Morgaine, 1992).

Critical Reflections

As the students worked on their projects, I was aware of the high level of enthusiasm and motivation. It was not, however, until the final examination and course evaluation that I became aware of the full extent of the impact of the projects upon the students. One of my concerns about spending an extended period of time on the projects was the amount of class time that would be "lost." When I compared the final examinations of these four classes to previous classes (which had been taught with an emphasis on content), I found very little difference in the scores. Less time had been spent on technical instruction. However, students were highly motivated by their projects so, when additional information was needed, they sought it out. The technical information learned in class was used for problem solving, so it became more meaningful to the students and consequently was better remembered.

The second revelation of the effectiveness of this new style of teaching came when I reviewed the students' evaluations of the course. Not all of the students in the four classes liked the projects or learned by doing them. Working on a project within the community did not fit their concept of the role of a student. They felt that they should be "in the classroom, learning about nutrition and food preparation. Community service was the job of adults." However, the vast majority of students did like the time spent on the projects and found it to be rewarding. I had hoped that students would achieve a sense of accomplishment. What they reported to me went far beyond that. Their evaluations spoke of the development of self-confidence, leadership, empathy, and caring. Some of the students became permanent volunteers at the homeless shelter and The Gathering Place. Two of the high school seniors decided to major in education as a result of their experiences in the school. Students who evaluated their peers' lunches made an appointment with the food service manager to discuss their concerns about the nutritional value of meals eaten at school. The students had learned to look for areas of need and to do something to help. They no longer said, "I'm just a kid. What can I do? Who would listen?" They discovered that they had the power to make a difference. They were emancipated to take action.

As their teacher, I felt emancipated, also. I had discovered the power and effectiveness of teaching for critical action. I no longer had to be the "expert." The students shared the responsibility for and the rewards of their education. The students were highly motivated and created an experience far more meaningful than any technical or communicative classroom

experience devised by the teacher. Teaching for ethical action is not easy. A great deal of time, organization, management, and effort must go into teaching from a critical/emancipatory perspective. However, I consider the benefits to the students (and the teacher) worth the effort.

Effective curriculum often blends the technical, communicative, and critical approaches to teaching and learning. The technical aspect helps students develop skills and provides the factual information which forms the knowledge base for higher level thinking. Communicative action allows students to work together to create meaning out of their experiences. The valued result is students who are able to use learned thinking skills to solve problems and make decisions (Kowalczyk, Neels, & Sholl, 1990). Emancipatory education helps give the students the ability and willingness to have control over their own lives (Wogensen, 1989). Each is an important part of the task that the teacher has of preparing students for their futures.

There are “elements of morality that are needed each day in our families, schools, and communities as we live and work together: compassionate caring, sound objective judging, and courageous responsible acting in the interests of those around us” (Laster, 1997, p. ix). Critical reflection on my experiences as a teacher and the educational theory which guided those experiences allowed me to grow as a teacher and to incorporate those elements of morality into the experiences of the students in my classroom.

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