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July 24, 2009

CI 557: Dr. Combs

Students at the Center: My View of Curriculum and Instruction

“What is the purpose of education?” Dr. Theodore asked. The reactions varied around the room. Some students sat with their eyes pointed at their shoes, relentlessly searching their minds for the answer. Some sat awestruck, as if the question had never occurred to them. Everyone in the program had spent the majority of their lives being educated. But no one could define the purpose. Is it to build America’s prowess as an economic power? Is it to teach students to be competent citizens in a democratic society as John Dewey suggested? Is it to teach students to ‘care’ as Nel Noddings posits? I don’t know. However, what I do know is whom education is for; *the students*. Keeping this in mind, I must answer two more questions. What is my view of Curriculum? How do I intend to instruct?

Thinking about curriculum as anything other than a textbook is a relatively new sensation for me. In 'Curriculum theory and practice' *the encyclopaedia of informal education*, Mark Smith outlines four distinct ways one could think of curriculum;

1. Curriculum as a body of knowledge to be transmitted.
2. Curriculum as a product.
3. Curriculum as a process.
4. Curriculum as praxis.

The consequences and implications of each view could fill volumes. When one recognizes curriculum as a body of knowledge to be transferred, they ignore the sociological and intellectual interests of the students by forcing a standard 'canon' to be absorbed. Looking at curriculum as a product allows for educators to focus on the assessment of the student and ignore the means by which the student is being taught. For example, how many times has study been relegated to rote memorization, only for the information to be ceremoniously extricated from the mind after an exam? I believe that if one views curriculum as a body of knowledge or a product, they fail to recognize why schools exist in the first place; *for the student*. Therefore, I believe that to serve students justly, educators should attempt to view education primarily as praxis and process.

When one views curriculum as praxis, they educate by "a proposal for action which sets out essential principles and features of the educational encounter... out of which may come informed and committed action." (Smith, 1996) I believe this approach is most beneficial because I feel as if America has lost the understanding of the importance and applicability of education. I couldn't tell you how many times I have heard relatives, co-workers, or friends say, "You'll never use what you learned in school out in the real world." I think this is a sad state of affairs. If students are compelled to bring what they have learned into the world they will be able to make the connection of how what they are learning might help them. They will see how it will help their families, their communities, and their world. To effectively teach certain government imposed standards through praxis, an educator would have to find ways to link the theoretical to the applicable through interdisciplinary attempts at community action

that may be restricted by administrative and safety rules. Therefore, when educators may not be able to teach through praxis, I find it necessary that educators at least attempt to teach through process.

“Curriculum is not a physical thing, but rather the interaction of teachers, students and knowledge. In other words, curriculum is what actually happens in the classroom and what people do to prepare and evaluate.” (Smith 1996)

I believe curriculum as process is superior to curriculum as knowledge or product because the curriculum is not taught *to* the student; curriculum is brought forth *through* the student. The process approach allows for educators to take advantage of a student’s unique interests, predispositions, learning speed, and learning style to create teachable ‘moments’ and activities. Furthermore, teaching as process more accurately replicates how we learn in the real world. We find something we’re interested in, or a problem we feel compelled to deal with. Then we set out to research and solve. It is through this *process* of exploration that we enrich our individual experience.

To reiterate, I believe the process and praxis methods of viewing curriculum are a cut above the rest because they are student centered. However, the student centered classroom will be rendered ineffective if the teacher doesn’t get to know his students. Educators must make an effort to understand and evaluate the set of experiences, feelings, and prejudices that make up the students educational profile. In other words, educators need to be familiar with students’ *predispositions*. The predisposition of students is the first major feature of J. Bruner’s theory of instruction.

For student centered education, it is critical for teachers to provide an environment in which students *reveal* their predispositions. Educators must also teach methods in which students can learn to *realize* their traits. Finally, when a predisposition is discovered, an educator must *react* to the invaluable information they have discovered.

How can educators get students to share their predispositions? Obviously, there are some students who are naturally open. However, as cogs in a system that has emphasized curriculum as *product*, most students view the teacher as the enemy. Why would a student open up to ‘the other, the man, or the system’? They won’t. This is why I believe all educators should take a nod from Nel Noddings, (pun intended), and work to establish *caring relationships*. Once the student realizes that they are cared-for, then I believe there is a much greater possibility of sharing. Some students spend their whole academic careers stuck with negative predispositions that they may feel are embarrassing. It is only when educators can establish caring relationships, that students will feel liberated to share their problems, quirks, and afflictions with their teacher.

In a perfect world, teachers would be able to interpret students’ behavior and realize what predispositions are necessary to react to. However, with classes filled with 30 or more students, the ability to analyze the nature of an individual student may be difficult. That’s why I think it’s important to teach students ways in which to *realize* their own predispositions. In *Adolescence*, Laurence Steinberg points out that “A noteworthy gain in cognitive ability during adolescence involves thinking about thinking itself, a process sometimes referred to as *metacognition*.” Teaching metacognition will yield two invaluable benefits. First, it will hone the student’s ability to think about the

way they learn. This will allow for better self assessment and self correction; skills which will be irreplaceable as students move into their adult lives. Secondly, as students start to analyze their learning experiences, they will be able to expose more predispositions. Obviously, there are more ways for teachers to realize their students' predispositions such as personality inventories, learning style tests, and introspective essay assignments. However, I believe if a student gains the ability to realize his or her own traits, and has the confidence to share with peers, they will be equipped with invaluable tools that will aid them through the rest of their lives.

After a predisposition is learned, what does an instructor do with the information? How does the instructor *react*? Intuitively, I believe the reaction should be based upon whether a given predisposition aids or hinders the student's education. To grasp the possibilities, I would like to attempt to categorize predispositions as *positive*, *neutral*, and *negative*. *Positive* predispositions, dictated by both natural and environmental factors, are malleable traits that should be reinforced and encouraged. *Neutral* predispositions, dictated by unchangeable biological and psychological attributes of a student, are not malleable and need to be handled with extra care. The proper reaction to neutral predispositions will either enrich or tarnish a student's educational experience. *Negative* predispositions, dictated by mostly environmental factors, are malleable traits that hinder the student's educational experience. Educators should work to redirect and correct *negative* predispositions. Here are just a few examples of *positive*, *neutral*, and *negative* predispositions that I believe a math teacher might encounter.

	Predisposition	Causes	Reaction
Positive	High drive and motivation.	Family, peers, personal commitment.	Encouragement. Awareness that desire for grades may be more important than desire for understanding.
	Love of Subject.	Personal interest from past experience.	Encouragement. Provision of additional resources. Awareness that a student's belief that they are 'good' may lead to missed understandings.
Neutral	Gifted.	Natural talent.	Provision of additional resources, tasks, and critical thought exercises. Awareness that talent may cause attention deficit or disruptive behavior if not addressed.
	Learning StylePreference.	Natural psychological propensity.	Provision of diverse set of learning and assessment experiences that address all learning styles. Awareness that lack of understanding may be caused by lack of instruction in appropriate learning style.
Negative	Distaste of Subject.	Past experience. Lack of success. Cultural, familial, or peer bias.	Connect subject with student interests by teaching through <i>praxis</i> . Emphasize positive reinforcement of success.
	Lack of motivation.	High or low self confidence. Disinterest.	Attempt to re- <i>activate</i> by differentiating instruction. Emphasize positive reinforcement.

After educators *reveal, realize, and react* to their students' predispositions, they will be better prepared to instruct content. Bruner's theory of instruction contains three other major features; the *structure* of the body of knowledge to be taught, the *sequence* in which to present the materials, and the nature and pacing of *rewards and punishments*. (Bruner 1966) However, without realizing a student's predispositions, an educator would have no guide to what structure, sequence, or reward is appropriate.

There are innumerable ways to instruct. One could spend years analyzing and philosophizing about what curriculum should be. I will not admit to even having an elementary knowledge of curriculum and instruction theory. However, I will be a teacher soon. I can only hope that if I keep the student at the center of my practice, everything else will follow. I believe that educators should view curriculum as process and praxis because these two ways of thinking about curriculum are centered on the student. I believe each of Bruner's four features of instruction are equally important. (I wish I could've devoted more space towards *structure, sequence, and rewards*.) However, I think that if educators spend more time getting to know their students predispositions, then the rest of instruction will follow.

What is the purpose of education? *The Student!*

References

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