

Teaching for Understanding

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Experienced teachers tend to know when a student has grasped an idea—a smile or nod may be interpreted as an outward sign that the students have understood what was taught. For teachers, such moments are rewarding milestones in the journey of teaching and learning. But what do we really mean when we say that a concept has been assimilated? Experience again tells us that a single smile or nod does not mean that the students have achieved complete understanding or that they can apply the new concept in situations outside the classroom.

There are certain general ways of knowing, for example, if $a > b$ and $b > c$ then $a > c$, which once learnt by a child are not forgotten in later life. These general ways of knowing are different from particular or specific ways of knowing, for example, the experimental setup and the precise methodology that must be followed in order to design a model to demonstrate an application of solar energy. For these specific ways of knowing, students must have acquired an understanding that goes beyond simply knowing the underlying principles. This understanding involves a sound grasp of the basic principles and other peripheral concepts that relate to the basics and which are appropriate to each particular example. Very often, however, even though these specific kinds of understandings are achieved in the classroom and many students can selectively transfer the understandings to situations that require their application, they are often forgotten if the learner is not constantly required to mentally interact with the concepts, or if the specific knowledge is taught in isolation or without the active participation of the learners in the development of the understandings.

Many teachers frequently express concern about this fact. How can students be helped to learn and retain? How is learning of new concepts/knowledge affected by or related to prior knowledge or preconceptions? How does the mind organise abstract concepts so that the learner can purposively retrieve and transfer them?

Attempting to answer these questions has been and continues to be a challenging area of research for many educational theorists. It is encouraging to note that recent curriculum development initiatives have been modified to include suggested methods of teaching, various types of learning activities, and some creative evaluation strategies. This suggests that planners have recognised that the outcome of learning is more than the acquisition of specific knowledge, and that an integral outcome for students must be the ability to link and negotiate new knowledge and experiences with existing knowledge, skills, and understandings to arrive at meaningful reasoning and explanations. Equally important, too, is that through the learning experience, students be allowed to make connections

among ideas developed in the classroom, as well as with understandings and experiences outside the classroom.

It is often a challenge for many teachers who have been socialised into a way of thinking that translates into the traditional dogmatic notion that students will learn if they want to, and that the teacher only has limited responsibility for encouraging or motivating students to want to learn. Furthermore, many teachers still see themselves as providers of knowledge rather than as facilitators of learning. As a teacher educator, I have realised that it is very difficult to reconcile the conventional and contemporary dichotomy when relating to some teachers; especially those with several years of experience. It seems to be difficult for many teachers to comprehend that learning for understanding requires not only the active participation of students, but also a special kind of teacher involvement, which includes a genuine appreciation of where students come from, what they bring with them into the classrooms, and what is to be done with this knowledge.

What might be termed the “new” approach demands, among other things, a high degree of personal commitment from teachers. But, far more importantly, it also necessitates the adoption of a superior level of academic diligence and devotion by teachers. It brings into question teachers’ personal philosophy of teaching/learning and means, therefore, that teachers must closely examine these personal philosophies and critically reflect on their relevance and feasibility in the classrooms where they practise. Needless to say, this process of reflection and self-assessment is in itself one that requires personal willingness, initiative, and perseverance. While it can be a humbling and personally rewarding exercise, it is one that requires hard work in order to effect the much-needed changes in the classrooms.

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