

Theories of Pedagogy and Reflective Practice

U. Hoeche

Department of Culinary Arts, Galway International Hotel School, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Galway, Ireland.

ABSTRACT

I am a lecturer in the Department of Culinary Arts at GMIT, teaching and supervising a multitude of students from level six right through to level nine. As a person with a practical background that spans a time period of more than twenty-five years, experiential learning had been at the core of my everyday life in the industry. I only recently joined the lecturing profession and teaching opened up a vast multitude of ways in which to transfer knowledge, motivate and encourage students, that went way beyond just experiential learning. Encountering the different theories of pedagogy made me realise that for student learning to be successful the right theory had to be applied at certain stages during the development of the student. It also became clear that not one size fits all, as each student has different abilities to learn. For me to grow as a lecturer and to deliver a high-quality student experience, critical reflection on my teaching had to become an essential part of my teaching, in order to continuously advance and better myself as an educational professional.

Keywords:

Theories of pedagogy, experiential learning, reflective practice, teaching philosophy

INTRODUCTION

In my teaching practice I utilise a multitude of teaching methods, tools and resources enabling the students to engage with lecture material before, during and after class, allowing them to acquire a more thorough understanding of the topic. In order to have a more formal and structured approach to my teaching this paper will investigate the discussions around the theories of pedagogy and critical reflection with the aim to formulate my Educational Philosophy Statement, based on my own values and beliefs.

LITERATURE ANALYSIS

Learning can be defined as ‘the acquisition of knowledge through study, experience or being taught’(Oxford Dictionary, 2018). Literature has often highlighted the important role each, behaviourism, cognitivism and humanist theory, have played in shaping how we learn today.

The Theory of Pedagogy

Behaviourism and its proponents have argued that behaviourism in learning encompasses the observation of physical reactions to a stimulus and the analysis of the outcomes of such activities (Mayes, 2015). Behaviourism, by its very meaning, focuses on the external features of reaction. Evidence has shown that the human mind can be conditioned when faced with a provocation (Pavlov, Thorndike, Watson and Skinner). Familiarity breeds consistency in behaviour. The methods used by the forerunners of behaviourism question their ethics of using animals and children such as ‘Little Albert’ (Mayes, 2015). The debate on whether or not their approaches were forced, taught or learnt tends to give the cognitive perspective more authority. However, the underpinning values placed on psychology is one of evidence (The Open University, 2019). Therefore, it is difficult to discount the work of the behaviourist movement.

The cognitive perspective believes that the human mind is not just a chamber to hold information and react to stimuli, but a complex process that gives more weight to understanding, than the input and output of information (Anderson, cited in Mayes, 2015). There is a sequence of events. Skinner (1953) believed that the human mind was dependent on the environment to learn. However, is it not the case that both behaviourism and cognitivism support different types of analysis on learning. The cognitive perspective searches for evidence in the support of how the mind and memory process the intake of data. The access to open learning, with the development of the Open University in 1967, coincided with the allocation of recognition on how psychology functions regarding learning, from the perspective of behaviourism to that of a cognitive nature. Moreover Manolescu (2013) discussing pedagogy through objectives is not dismissing behaviourism, but merely re-evaluating the way we do things in education.

The humanist concept is founded on the values of the individual, with an underlying emphasis on self-belief, personal- freedom and goals (Rogers and Freiberg, 1969). The popularity of the humanist theory has increased since the 1960s at which stage the behaviourism and cognitivism approach came under scrutiny by opponents (Eggen et al., 2004; McInerney, 2013) The rise

of the humanist theory instigated a shift from a teacher centred to a learner centred approach in which the student's contributions are valued, and the teacher is taking on the role of a facilitator (Lefrancois, 1999; Tangney, 2014). Critics argue that the humanist view may be over-optimistic making the assumption "that all students are capable of self-actualisation" (Stewart, 2012, p 3-20)

Which Theory of Pedagogy

The study of learning and how one learns has been an intense debate for many years as have been the different theories of pedagogy.

According to Mayes (2016a) there are problems with favouring a specific theory of pedagogy in the implementation of teaching methods in a learning environment. A specific theory may not be sufficiently aligned to the student's awareness of learning, and possibly his or her ability to understand content. However, in order to successfully support development, the student audience should be exposed to the appropriate theory of pedagogy and method of teaching. Carlile and Jordan (2005) advocate that the method chosen should be based on time, assessment, and development. To progress from one level to the next requires the attainment of basic facts and knowledge, sometimes reliant on associative methods to teaching. The behaviourist approach in early learning is essential to secure a foundation of basic knowledge. Therefore, the acquisition of facts provides a platform to a cognitive approach to student learning. Likewise, Mayes (2016b) points out the importance of media choice, level of progression, and timing in support of individual development. Timing in this case is associated to the student's readiness to learn. Achieving an adequate level of deep learning without the willingness to understand is doubtful. Consequently, providing elementary information and knowledge, in advance of readiness to learn, is time well spent. Furthermore, Bloom (1968) reasons that understanding expectations on the part of both student and lecturer is of utmost importance. Taking this fact into consideration should facilitate the identification of suitable materials and methods therefore maximising student learning.

Ertmer and Newby (1993) reiterate the fact that pedagogical theories should not be pitched against one another in order to determine the best theory. Embracing and observing their progress may result in implementing behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism as students move from an affiliation to basic knowledge through associative strategies, to higher level and deep understandings through constructivism.

Reflective Practice

Ericsson et al. (2007) argue that to attain expertise in a specific field requires attention, practice, reflection, patience and in addition a supportive environment. It is the part of reflection which is highlighted by both Davies (2012) and Ghaye (2010) as one of the most important aspects to not only improve the quality of teaching but also of learning, benefiting not only teachers but also students. To be a competent, confident and creative teacher one needs to be reflective based on evidence in order to improve, while ‘understanding and questioning the context in which teaching, and learning takes place’. The two authors above agree that that by stimulating students and educators to engage in the process of reflective practise, they will be able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, however individuals must be willing to question their own way of doing things. Reflective practice will enable practitioners to achieve, maintain and continuously improve professional competencies on the voyage of life-long learning. Fook (2015) however argues that in some cases critical reflection may make individuals feel vulnerable, therefore identifying the benefits of the reflection process is essential. Thompson and Thompson (2018) go even further identifying some of the other barriers to reflective practice such as, time constrains, organisational culture and a lack of appropriate skills, although concluding that all these obstacles can be overcome through critical thinking, self-awareness, supportive structures, being professional and making practice work.

CONCLUSION AND TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

I am originally from a very practical background where experiential learning was a daily necessity. However, as an academic professional, I have realised that to enable students to reach their potential, theory of pedagogy and methods of teaching must be carefully chosen. Both theories and methods vary considerably as a student moves through the different levels of education, and as a lecturer it is my responsibility to identify which school of thought best suits the student needs at any given moment in their journey through college.

In my role as an educator I see myself as both a facilitator and motivator, but additionally as an innovator that is improving the quality of teaching through the process of critical reflection. It is this process that allows me to gain a better understanding of what works best to the benefit of the student, providing them with a supportive and safe learning environment in which they can prosper and flourish.

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