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Characteristics of good teaching: The use of creative methods within our university classrooms?

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Abstract

The good teaching characteristics of getting students to think for themselves, keeping discussions at appropriate levels, situating theory in reality and communication are explored within this paper. Indeed, it is argued that education professionals effectively utilizing these four characteristics can promote a positive and engaging learning environment for their students. Furthermore, the paper explores the rise of creative methods of teaching. In doing so, examples of how creative methods of learning have the potential to be positive tools for student engagement and understanding are presented. However, the paper also lends focus the potential pitfalls of creative methods, suggesting such activities have the potential to be viewed as beneficial only in the short term.

Introduction

The role of teaching professionals within universities requires individuals to be adaptive and creative, to enforce intended learning outcomes and to provide a professional yet friendly learning environment. This, at times, can present a difficult juggling act, with the teacher attempting to focus on several issues at once. Indeed, in response to juggling such challenges, education professionals often develop their own teaching styles, based on their own characteristics, 'views and beliefs about teaching' (Saroyan and Snell, 1997:85). While such teaching styles are likely to differ somewhat due to the personal traits of the professionals involved, several key characteristics are often associated with good teaching; getting students to think for themselves, keeping discussions at appropriate levels, situating theory in reality, and communication. This paper presents a discussion of the identified teaching characteristics, while also offering an outline of the potential benefits to students and teaching staff when such characteristics are adopted in teaching practices. Furthermore, this paper also explores the rise of creative methods of learning, suggesting that the addition of creative learning activities within the university classroom has the potential to increase student engagement through providing a form of participation that differs to the traditional verbal and written approaches often used within university classrooms.

Characteristics of good teaching

Getting students to think for themselves can be seen as an important characteristic of good teaching. As Morss and Murray (2005:135) suggest, in doing so, teachers can help students 'to help themselves'. This allows students to take responsibility for their own learning while also giving them the necessary tools to engage with class discussions and to develop their own ideas about course materials. However, in order for students to engage in such efforts, the teacher must adopt the more passive role of facilitator. In adopting this persona, the teacher can encourage students to take control of their own learning and development, while continuing to ensure that discussions remain relevant to the intended learning outcomes of the course.

In a similar vein, the ability to keep classroom discussions and learning at an appropriate level for all students can also be viewed as an important characteristic of good teaching. Students may have diverse backgrounds and reasons to attend university. For example, several individuals may be mature students, while others may be recent school leavers. Such dichotomy requires the teacher to be flexible and adaptive to the needs of each student in order to ensure that the intended learning outcomes of a class can be achieved by all learners. As Cuthbert (2005:235) suggests, this illustrates the need to 'focus on understanding the individual student', as gaining such an understanding will enable the teacher to gain perspective as to what each student requires in order to learn effectively. Facilitating such discussions, however, also requires the creation of a friendly yet professional working environment for both students and the teacher. Failure to create such an environment may result in learners not achieving their intended learning outcomes, as they may be uncomfortable in asking questions or engaging in class discussions with other students. As such, the ability to provide a productive working environment for all learners can be seen as a key characteristic in creating a positive teaching experience for all involved.

A further characteristic of good teaching is situating theory in reality. Aligning theory with a more 'practical aspect of learning' (Sreedhar, 2013:53) can help students to realise where theory can be seen in real life situations, while also potentially giving them a better understanding of how that theory might be applied in the real world and any consequences it may entail. As such, a good teacher should be able to respond to the different learning styles of students through the use of varying techniques of knowledge dissemination. It may also be seen as helpful for the teacher to link theory to relevant 'real life' experiences that students have previously experienced; allowing the student to see the theory in a context that they can relate to. Indeed, teachers who can draw from their own backgrounds and research can also make learning more interesting and fun for their students through connecting theory and reality.

The final characteristic of good teaching to be explored by this paper is that of communication. Good communication with students can be seen as a key aspect in both good teaching and learning. If a teacher cannot effectively communicate with students, understanding could be reduced and as such, students will be unable to learn to their maximum potential. This type of communication could also include the transfer of knowledge from the teacher that is not seen as subject specific. For

example, a tutor could be knowledgeable about the course they are presenting to students, future career paths that the course could lead to, or future education paths that could be accessed by completing the course. Again, here a good teacher is required to assess the differences between learners and be able to communicate the knowledge required by that student. For example, a mature student may be interested in a career path, whereas a recent school leaver may be interested in future educational paths to be accessed by the completion of the course. Similarly, the use of multiple forms of technology can be seen as a valuable tool for student engagement and communication (Millward, 2016). Embracing technology within the classroom through, for example, with using polling software, allows technology to become a valuable part of the learning experience, rather than a distraction to learning, while also encouraging students to participate.

The characteristics of good teaching discussed within this article can be seen as helpful in promoting a positive learning environment for both students and teachers. They will also help to facilitate students' attempts to accomplish the intended learning outcomes of their courses, while continuing to develop the teaching style and capabilities of the education professional. This continued development will allow future teaching opportunities to be improved from the perspective of both students and the teacher. Improving an individuals' teaching skills could also be beneficial to them in the future in a wider context, for example, with improved communication skills being utilized at conferences or events.

Creative methods of teaching

In addition to the more traditional characteristics of teaching discussed in the previous section of this paper, education professionals are increasingly utilizing creative methods within their teaching practices. Creative methods, such as theatre, painting, poetry, dance, drawing and making (Dezeuze, 2010) are increasingly becoming viewed as novel ways in which to engage students. As focus is primarily placed upon the activity, rather than its intended outcomes, such methods can be viewed as particularly helpful when attempting to engage students who may dislike the traditional forms of verbal and written learning.

Mattern (1999) suggests that, the use of arts-based activities may be seen as a substitute for the more traditional verbal and written forms of communication. Indeed, creative methods hold much potential for increasing engagement and understanding for a variety of students, including those with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, those for whom English is not their mother tongue, individuals who lack the confidence to contribute to discussions, or those who may find public speaking particularly difficult. As such, creative methods illuminate an alternate way in which students can participate in and engage with classroom activities. Furthermore, as such activities are unlikely to have been previously undertaken by any member of the class, issues of status can, to a certain extent, be removed, as even students who typically attempt to dominate group discussions will have the same experience and authority in completing the activity as those who typically would not contribute to discussions.

This leads us next to the notion of creative methods as an alternate medium through which students can express their opinions and knowledge. Indeed, the use of art as a medium has been widely documented by the existing literature (Boal, 2000; Nakamura, 2009). Once again, this can be seen as beneficial to those with a dislike of the traditional forms of learning output such as written and verbal responses. Furthermore, the use of creative methods can encourage understanding, for example, in providing an alternate way of thinking about problems through the use of props.

Indeed, Sutherland (2012:25) suggests, 'arts-based methodologies as experiential learning to improve participants' abilities in responsibly navigating the complexities of contemporary organisational contexts'. In doing so, Sutherland provides an example in which MBA students take turns at conducting a choir to develop their leadership skills. The students are reported as focusing on being able to 'see, hear and feel the aesthetics of leadership as a property of group interaction' (2012:27), therefore affording an alternate way in which understanding about aspects such as listening and giving directions can be gained. Similarly, Taylor and Ladkin (2009) discuss a group of MBA students taking art classes in order to improve their creativity and a class of Medical students being taught art history to help with diagnostic skills when dealing with patients, or being taught theatre techniques to help increase empathy.

However, 'arts-based methods can act as the "flavour of the month", adding something new and engaging … with little idea of what that something is.' (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009:55). While the use of creative methods within the classroom can provide an exciting way in which students can explore difficult material, it is vital that the teaching professional remains focused on the intended learning outcomes. Without such focus, intended learning outcomes could easily be forgotten, with emphasis instead being placed only upon the creative activity itself. It is also important that the teaching professional is mindful of the nature of the class, for example, the time and space restrictions of the session, but also, whether students may feel uncomfortable in engaging with such activities.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined four key characteristics involved with good teaching practices. The paper has suggested that the 'tried and tested' methods of getting students to think for themselves, keeping discussions at an appropriate level, situating theory in reality and good communication provide a multitude of benefits for both students and education professionals. This paper has also explored the role of creative methods of teaching within the university classroom. While such methods are being hailed by some scholars as a positive and novel way to encourage student engagement and participation (Sutherland, 2012), this paper suggests that teaching professionals should remain mindful of the limitations of creative methods. Indeed, time and space restrictions and the individual characteristics of students are likely to be a deciding factor in the success of any such activities. Furthermore, this paper also suggests that when attempting to utilize creative methods of teaching within the university classroom, teaching professionals should remain mindful of the intended learning outcomes of the class, rather, than allowing students to focus only on the

task at hand. Indeed, while this paper recognises the potential of creative methods to encourage and engage students, the question as to whether creative methods are just another juggling ball to be held in the air by the education professional remains.

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Conflicts of Interest

The section 'Characteristics of Good Teaching' has been revised from an assignment submitted during the TLHEP course at Keele University in 2015.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.