

Destroying the Teacher: The Need for Learner-Centered Teaching

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"He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher." —Walt Whitman

"In the average classroom someone is talking for two-thirds of the time, two-thirds of the talk is teacher-talk, and two-thirds of the teacher-talk is direct influence." —N.A. Flanders

"Schools are designed on the assumption that there is a secret to everything in life; that the quality of life depends on knowing that secret; that secrets can be known only in orderly succession; and that only teachers can properly reveal these secrets." —Ivan Illich

"Who needs the most practice talking in school? Who gets the most?" —John Holt

Active learner involvement

Teachers talk too much. And too much of this talk is directive. Many of us are wryly familiar with Flanders' "two-thirds" rule, which, in my experience, holds true even in the most "progressive" classrooms. The only solution is for the teacher consciously to become more silent, so that the learner may become more vocal.

Learning is most effective when the learner is the initiator of the learning process. (Bruner notes that this holds true even for children a few weeks old.) With regard to language, it has been found that syntactic complexity and sentence length both increase when the topic is one in which the learner has been actively involved. This surely argues for the kind of withdrawal of control on the teacher's part that I have recommended above.

Related to the above fact is evidence that the emotion associated with learning an item is important in storing it. In a recent article, Brown has described affective factors as "the keys to language-learning success." Even hostility, it appears, stores items better than a total lack of emotional involvement—though perhaps this is a path we should not follow too far!

There is thus a clear need for the content of language teaching materials to involve the learner—to relate to his needs, interests, and moral concerns. It seems to me that too much of our material is empty of such involvement. Characters and situations in English-teaching course books are frequently vapid stereotypes. Although some writers might argue that materials, for the widest distribution, must be morally value-free, I would say that being morally neutral is itself to make a decision about values.

Another important finding is that learning improves when goals are set before tasks are begun: the learner should be aware of the learning objectives. Relating this to reading, for example, we may consider it more useful to ask questions about a text *before* the students read it than afterward. In this way, the learner will approach the text with a set purpose, as adults normally do. After all, we seldom read anything without a reason; yet that is what we ask our learners to do time and time again.

Experience before interpretation

Psychologists such as Bruner and Piaget have stressed the need for an initial tactile stage of learning. Bruner calls it the "enactive" stage and Piaget the "sensorimotor" stage, but the principle is the same, namely, that the learner needs

time to "mess around" with target material before he is asked to give proof that he has learned it. We may have noticed this process while watching our own children beginning to read. There is a good deal of handling of printed material, or playing with it, of changing the words of the text before real reading starts. And this period of *experiencing* the material seems to be a necessary precondition for *interpreting* it. Yet we often ask language learners to dispense with this stage when they are dealing with a particular piece of learning.

Avoidance of oversimplification

It may seem paradoxical to follow the above plea for giving the learner more time to *experience* target material by asking the teacher not to oversimplify it. In reality, however, this is another aspect of the same principle: that learning is something only the learner can do. The teacher cannot learn *for* the pupil; he can only provide good conditions within which learning may take place. If things are made too easy for the learner, he will not be inclined to use his own learning resources.

Again, let us relate this question of oversimplifying to the problem of reading. New words and structures in a reading passage are commonly practiced and drilled before the passage is read, so that the learner does not have to cope with anything that he hasn't seen before. In some cultures it is regarded as improper, in fact, to ignore any word that appears in the text, the printed text itself being accorded an almost religious respect. Yet if we drill all the new language in the reading passage before it is read, we are preventing the learner from developing a crucial reading skill: the need to guess, to make hypotheses, to play hunches about the nature of the text—specifically, to predict what is likely to come next. The ability to pick up context cues within a text is vital to the successful decoding of it. Merritt has described the act of reading as "one of prediction and model making rather than word-recognition." And Goodman defines the process as follows: "Reading is a selective process. It involves partial use of available language cues...."