



ESL MiniConference

What Does It Mean To Learn? ESL MiniConference Editor Reflects on the Purpose of the Teaching Activity

"A genuine purpose always starts with an impulse," wrote John Dewey in 1938 (*Experience and Education*). Throughout our lives we feel impulses, and some of these are converted to what Dewey called an "end-view."

Neither impulse nor desire is itself a purpose. A purpose....involves foresight of the consequences which will result from acting upon impulse....[which] involves the operation of intelligence....For impulse and desire produce consequences not by themselves alone but through their interaction or cooperation with surrounding conditions. (Dewey, 1938)

This concept of educational purpose is in accord with that expressed by W.E.B. DuBois (1903), who suggested that schooling should enable students to participate freely and fully in a democratic society. But Dewey's notion of nurturing a learner's impulse runs counter to Booker T. Washington's formulation (1896), in which the purpose of school was primarily to equip students for material success.

Washington's model seems focused on social efficiency and social mobility as two key aims of school-based training, while the vision of DuBois included social mobility, but especially pointed towards good citizenship and participatory democracy as higher-level goals.

Another voice in the discussion of the purpose of education is bell hooks (1994), whose concept focuses on ways in which the present educational system ignores the impulses of students who are not members of the dominant class, race, and gender in America; a system that discourages reflection, resistance, and change. Her perspective sees social reproduction and social control as the overwhelming purposes of current educational practices, and she calls for a radically different approach which would empower students to overturn the current system. I believe Dewey would agree with hooks on principle.

For Dewey, again, the purpose of education begins with--but is not limited to--a learner's impulse in a particular direction, and his or her acting on that impulse. This concept of purpose leads logically to

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implications relevant to a further question: what is the teacher's role in the learning process?

If there cannot be a purpose without an impulse, then the primary role of a teacher must be to perceive and respond in a certain way to these learning impulses, or at the very least to establish a learning environment that is sensitive and responsive to them. Dewey has specific suggestions regarding how a teacher can make sure he or she is pre-disposed to notice the learning impulses of each student. He says that it is key to be familiar with the background of experience that the student brings with him or her to school and, further, that this is simpler and easier to do with younger children because among older children teachers will find a greater diversity of intervening experiences.

Those who deal with the pre-school child...do not have much difficulty in determining the range of past experience or in finding activities that connect in vital ways with it....It is harder to find out the background of the experience of individuals and harder to find out just how the subject-matters already contained in that experience shall be directed so as to lead out to larger and better organized fields. (Dewey, 1938)

Rogers and Frieberg (1994) provide further details regarding what is involved in a teaching approach that recognizes the importance of allowing learning impulses to come from the students themselves. These authors distinguish between passive and active classrooms, and include the following on their list of the features of active classrooms:

- cooperative learning and group projects
- students as shareholders; ownership of the classroom
- students taking initiative to interact; creating new ideas
- students involved, engaged; higher attendance rates
- student work on display; students write every day

They found many examples of positive student experiences at the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts (HSPVA) in Houston.

Upon entering the campus, the visitor is drawn into its climate of information camaraderie. There is neither the repressed silence of a custodial atmosphere nor the noise of the disengaged and idle. Instead, there is the busy hum of activity, earnest discussing and purposeful movement. (Freedom to Learn, 1994)

According to Rogers and Freiberg, the best teachers are not necessarily the most "brilliant" ones. These will be remembered forever by students, yet the same students "are quite unable to remember what they learned

in those classes." On the other hand, say these authors, students "can remember in detail every learning experience they themselves initiated." This difference is what distinguishes a "facilitator" from any other kind of teacher, they say.

Dewey's ideas about the purpose of education, linked with these descriptions by Rogers and Freiberg of what it looks like when teaching nurtures, builds on, and supports student impulses, together give a clear picture of an appropriate role for the teacher in the learning experience.

A further question concerns the nature of knowledge itself and, in particular, the nature of truth. Perhaps truth is the most vital piece of knowledge to get a hold on, because it is at the core of whether we are able to assess progress towards goals and also evaluate our performance as teachers. What do we know about these phenomena? Can we be sure of what we know? Do we share with other teachers a common understanding of "truth" which allows us to compare experiences--and learn in the process?

There are two concepts of truth that were explored recently in a philosophy of education course I took. First, there was Socrates and the Allegory of the Cave. In this story, there is one truth and it exists at a higher plane of reality that is achieved through the experience of breaking chains of illusion and belief.

A second version of truth is much more relative, as expressed by Maxine Greene (1995), in her description of an approach to teaching and learning that acknowledges and embraces multiple perspectives and multiple realities.

I would like to suggest that these two concepts of truth can--and indeed ought to--be blended in a teacher's development over the course of his or her career. Because the process of letting go of long-held beliefs and assumptions is frightening and generates so much temporary confusion, or dissonance (Freire, 1970), there is a psychological need for something concrete at that stage.

A person on a journey of lifelong learning needs to stop at certain points and throw out a few anchors, locking in his or her latest version of reality for a while. Then it is time to break free again and grow through interaction with colleagues and others who have different ideas and different experiences from us. By moving back and forth over time, from a universal truth position to one that embraces multiple realities, a teacher will be able to assess his or her performance and the experiences of the students with increasing degrees of accuracy.

A longer version of this report was submitted to fulfill a course requirement in a philosophy of education class taken by the author and taught by Dr. Kayann Taylor at Kansas State University.

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2008 ESL MiniConference Online



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