



This is not a ball game: A personal narrative on teaching ideologies

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The following are accounts of my thirty years' experience in education, first as a student of Karelian State Pedagogical Institute and then as a teacher of English, linguistics and other related subjects at universities in Petrozavodsk, Russia. It is a subjective, far from complete and unjustifiably generalizing version of social reality.

I tend to think that contrast and comparison are efficient tools for initial input in the process of assessment and evaluation of any human activity. For me it works wonders in my newly obtained area of interest - educational research, in which, I have to admit, I am technically in the very beginning. But in employing contrast and comparison I think I have gone a long way. I have always been interested in what makes human act the way they do, say things they say and react in so many unique and inexplicable ways. Quite early in life I noticed that in the teaching profession the variety of motives, concerns and intentions exceeds any expectations. My permanent fascination with these mysterious differences has brought me to the point where, as I hope, theory and method can help me to understand the elusive nature of teaching.

My experiences as a student

During my school years I observed all kinds of teaching strategies, tactics and practices. Of course, at that time I had never consciously analyzed the obvious differences in teaching attitudes and approaches and I could not fully understand reasons and motivations behind them. I just kept on registering them, maybe as much as others. But now, unlike many of my classmates, I can consider these experiences and use these numerous little incidents as a starting point of my research on teacher identity.

During my college years, I became aware of more sheer contrasts in teaching attitudes and practices, when, as I understand now, I observed teachers that represented an enormous variety of pedagogical skills and teaching ideologies. During my first year at a teacher's training college in the former Soviet Union, I realized for the first time in my life that it is me who bears all responsibility for what I know and what I could learn. Most of my teachers thought otherwise: they were in charge, they knew what I must know, their judgment was final, and knowledge was predefined and should have been delivered as such. The dominant ideology demanded absolute precision, no doubt, no slack, no hesitation. Books should be read, memorized and reproduced in a clear and loud voice. It worked well, good students kept on getting excellent grades. Understanding was not a requirement, faith and confidence were compulsory.

The way lectures and seminars were conducted rarely varied. Perhaps only the pace of delivery and the level of personal involvement noticeably fluctuated, though I cannot blame my teachers for this. They eventually fell into the groove; they found a nice well-worn and well-traveled path to avoid anxiety and stress. It also happens for the reason of teachers' systematic adaptation of previous experience, you can surely find similar adaptive techniques in other professions with changing contexts and undefined procedures. I noticed a long time ago that my colleagues and myself invariably chose our favorite or the most influential teachers in our lives as role models in our own pedagogical endeavors whether in school or in other contexts. I believe that it is being done subconsciously though it is obvious that this choice can be accounted for by the fact that humans tend to observe others and choose the most effective (as they think) way of doing things whether it is making pancakes or reading lectures. I also noticed, though I have never thoroughly investigated this, that it is all about both attitudes and ideologies, and here teachers and, consequently, their students may encounter a number of problems. That is, if your favorite teacher used to ridicule her students for being indolent and inattentive at times, mockery is likely to become your pedagogical tool if you choose a teaching career.

Reliably right

Building one's identity around a practice and an attitude may be a good start but not the best strategy because if you assume a position of unquestionable authority while having insufficient knowledge of the subject matter. If you choose to do that, your students will soon start thinking that you are a pompous fool, and you will have to use all institutional tools available to keep your teaching outcomes under control. In other words, to make them appear as valid. Embracing any other position derived from available pedagogical philosophies has its consequences too. You can stick to your chosen facilitator-like position, but if your students are used to being controlled and expect being told what they want, you may end up hearing different kinds of discourse about a necessity of total control and a need for administrative pressure that some of the students considered vital for their schooling success.

Most of the teachers I observed as a student would easily fall into a category of teachers with a strong belief that authority and control are the key qualities of those involved in institutionalized cultural reproduction. Again, it is not said in the way of criticism; they were all products of their time and place and so am I. They picked up their practices and pedagogical skills naturally from the prevalent ideology that did not allow dissidence and had zero tolerance for the unconvinced.

In other words, they were always committed and devoted to the objectivist doctrine, they were always right, and what they taught was the ultimate truth. Even if a light shadow of doubt had ever passed their minds, they would never, ever have shown their momentary qualms to us, students. Reflection was a sign of weakness, relativism was a derogatory term and conviction was not the final but the initial point of any inquiry. If the ideology was based on these principles, so was education. Lecturing, especially in social sciences, sounded like preaching and I can assure you that this is an understatement. One might think that it is hard to learn anything by this excruciating method. Not at all – in reality it was merely the attitude but not the content – nobody claimed that snow turns yellow when exposed to intense heat.

Steve Fuller in his *The Sociology of Intellectual Life* blames academics for inability to improvise claiming that “the canonical form of academic communication is the oral delivery of a written text” (Fuller, 2009). It may be so but learning outcomes of such an approach, I dare to say, were quite obvious. Great minds were educated in this very manner when reading out loud from a book was a common way of delivering a lecture. I see no contradiction here: learning was just taken out of the classroom, using their lecture notes as a plan, students learned elsewhere. Frankly, not all the lectures I listened to were deprived of human contact and empathy for those who hungered and thirsted for knowledge. Luckily for all of us, a teaching community is usually a motley crew.

And in my case there were others who usually kept a lower profile, smiled knowingly, referred to some never-heard-of books, names and theories and let us, students, think that there was a different universe where odd thoughts and ideas were allowed and appreciated. They let us believe that the truth was somewhere out there. These teachers, when confronted, would admit their unorthodoxy but would add a notorious “who am I to make a difference” or “it is not for me to argue”. But this subtle calling of the few was noticed, if not by many but some. Unconventionality is always attractive among the young: for them “the cause of inquiry is better served by being interestingly wrong than being reliably right” (Fuller, 2009). I still believe in that.

Side effects

When I myself started teaching at a university, I kept on looking for the ultimate approach but my teaching continued with a varying level of success. No wonder I was at times inspired by my students and my teaching, but sometimes I felt nothing but shame. Looking at it from today’s position, I can see now that my colleagues have probably succeeded more than myself in their transfer of knowledge and skills judging by the level of students’ satisfaction with their grades. I had a suspicion that grades cannot be a reliable tool of validation, but I nonetheless envied those who had or, at least, never showed any deviation from the chosen ideology and their established position in the classroom. Their students were happy with their course of studies, with their grades and their received knowledge. I often felt like a complete failure.

As discipline, punishment and control have never been features of my teaching practices; I relied on persuasion, encouragement, demonstration and metacognitive discourse. I think it worked best when my students eventually realized that they could not expect any other attitude. Whatever little or much I had to offer within the controlled curriculum was always delivered, but what used to depress and brought an extra degree of anxiety was assessment. At times, my approach to curricula was far too liberal, I liked to improvise and occupy my students’ attention integrating alternative views and theories. By the end of a course, the amount of material covered (or often just touched upon) was so extensive that I often ended up testing whether the learners were able to recognize general patterns of intellectual landscapes we had previously spent hours roaming. After a merciless self-reevaluation I started devising my courses in a more structured and formalized way. I tried to stick to the plan and soon memorized the whole set of my lectures, generated sophisticated tests and after that, when giving them exams, I felt like listening to my own voice. Is reproduction of what one heard at the lecture or read in the textbook sufficient for getting a good grade? Unable to argue that it was not, I would generously scratch down numerous “A”-s for retelling my lectures on History of the English Language. Did my students feel my disappointment? I hoped they did not. When I tried to probe for understanding and interpretations it often ended up in my lecturing on each item of the exam question list, which I considered quite useful but completely irrelevant in the context of evaluation.

All these didactical fluctuations took their toll on our time budget and, sadly, on the learning process. One might think that the ebb and flow of my teaching efficiency should have made me cynical and suspicious to all commonly employed approaches to teaching and learning. Not in the least. My hidden failures and unnoticed victories (well, I hope there were more of the latter than I know of) taught me to bear with side effects. I am convinced that they are always there. Dissertations and research reports promoting new or newly adopted methodology typically have no mention of their adverse effects. They are commonly omitted from the concluding remarks. I tend to believe that any refined methodology contains a number of shortcomings. Identifying them and tolerating their adverse effect allowed me to enjoy a provisional truce in my teacher identity struggle.

Truce with oneself

This half-baked construct can be applied to selecting methodology for subject teaching too. Language

teachers and researchers have generated an enormous amount of literature on methodology in search for the ultimate way of learning a foreign tongue. This field of studies still looks like an arena of constant battle.

During the last three decades, Communicative Language Teaching has been the most popular and the most widely accepted methodology in language classrooms around the world. For many years the CLT has enjoyed the unproven status of the most effective method of language teaching. Being based on activity and competence principles, this methodology reportedly fits perfectly into new curricula and modern classrooms. Studies (for example, Alanen, 2000; Harjanne & Tella, 2009) and my own experience show that despite of all CLT claims, a native tongue is still used in language classroom 50-60 % (or more) of time, while the target language should be used in all teacher-student communication. One may think that such approach to CLT undermines the very integrity of the method and that it all happens due to lack of consistency in applying this acclaimed methodology. I tend to think that it is a manifestation of an inherent limitation of CLT: as a method, CLT is extremely time-consuming in the area of metacognitive instructions and metalinguistic clarifications. Its deficiency is also obvious in immediate comprehension control. In other words, it is not easy to explain grammar and vocabulary use in the target language and simultaneously make sure that everything is clear and comprehensible to all.

This concern about students' awareness, rather than inconsistency or unprofessionalism, makes language teachers switch to the students' native language in order to transfer information promptly and correctly. I am convinced that one should be selective in complying CLT demands and requirements as well as in employing any other methods or methodology. Methodology and didactical doctrines are not sacred and should not remain unquestioned. I am convinced that one can and should apply methods as required or deemed appropriate. It is ok to consciously mix them. CLT may be successfully combined with other methods and techniques. If language teaching methods are treated as tools rather than ideologies, the concept of principled eclecticism might be quite refreshing and promising (see for example, Brown, 2007). It is based on the idea that any methods in language teaching may be successfully used separately or in various combinations if the teacher can rationally assess time, goals, language levels of the students, their motivation and their learning (or metacognitive) skills.

Non-CLT methods can be adequately used when students know what they are doing and are motivated enough to sustain the tedium of drills and numerous repetitions. Some may say that lack of communicative exercises and practice will make them incapable of keeping up a conversation. I would say that with mature and fully developed prosodic, lexical and grammatical skills, truly communicative skills may be easily obtained with practice (that is, with more time). While the orthodox CLT can ideally provide a higher level of communicative skills, it will be also accompanied by a considerable level of uncertainty in vocabulary use and grammar, which again will require additional time for correction.

So, eventually, the choice of methodology is a matter of teacher comfort and learner satisfaction. Some learners would demand thorough explanations of lexical and grammatical phenomena claiming they "must know what it all means" and some would start speaking and making numerous mistakes hoping to correct them later in life (blessed are those who believe). In other words, whatever of the available methods a teacher chooses, she is bound to win and lose.

I am almost sure the reader has already started wondering "so what?" How can these relativistic truisms work for better teaching? My previous teaching experience has made it clear to me that taking sides in any absolute sense does not work well in this area of human activity, and though it is so tempting to root for one team, being parochial is counter-productive. Methodology is a variable; affordable progress with bearable side effects is a constant.

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