

Teaching Philosophy
of
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My teaching philosophy is centred on my support of a view that teaching is not about delivering content but is the act of designing experiences that encourage and enable student learning. (Lattuca, 2006)

Ramsden (1992, cited in Laurillard, 1993, p.13) stated that “the aim of teaching is simple: it is to make student learning possible”. All my teaching efforts are channelled towards making learning possible for my students.

Within my specialist area of teaching public relations I find that entry-level and mid-course students often have inaccurate or limited views of what public relations professional practice involves.

I aim to facilitate learning that moves students from this point to one where they have a more informed, grounded and critical understanding of the ideas and principles of the field. From this point they should be better able to make informed decisions pertaining to their future careers both within public relations and the wider Communication field.

My past studies in Communication, and my long-standing research interests, have explored the construction of meaning and how meaning is communicated. I am particularly interested in the reception model of communication which in essence locates the attribution and construction of meaning (derived from media) with the receiver rather than the transmitter or source. (McQuail, 2000, p. 56)

In mass communication theory, the reception model is seen as a radical departure from the transmission model which in essence posits a fairly linear approach to communication where a message containing meaning is transmitted via a channel to a receiver, who will, in the absence of interference or “noise” will be able to understanding the meaning in the sent message. (ibid, p. 46)

The questioning of the transmission model of communication within the Communication discipline is mirrored within the academic literature relating to higher education teaching.

Laurillard (1993, p15) states that arguing for the active engagement of the learner in the formation of their ideas goes back to Dewey’s rejection of “the classical tradition of passing on knowledge in the form of unchangeable ideas”.

Interestingly, in the communication literature, Carey (2002, p 37- 42) discusses Dewey’s 1916 writings as being the first point of putting forward alternative models to the linear transmission model.

My teaching has always focused on providing opportunities for students to construct contextual meaning rather than focusing on students being passive receivers of

information that I impart to them. The more I read and learn about teaching, the more I believe this is the correct approach.

I understand this to be a constructivist approach to learning in that students can actively engage in the process of constructing meaning. (Anderson, Krathwohl et al, 2001, p 65)

I design assessment tasks that require more than recalling or recognising factual information. In constructivist learning, instruction is required to “go beyond the simple presentation of factual knowledge”. (ibid.)

Martin, Prosser, Trigwell, Ramsden and Benjamin (2000) stated that “those teachers who conceive of the object of study in terms of ‘knowledge as being constructed’ intend to adopt more student-focussed approaches to teaching”.

In aiming to be student-centred in my teaching, I aim to address the need for students to develop problem solving abilities that are underpinned by a solid foundation of communication and public relations theory and a context that reflects both current “real world” professional practice and scope for enhancement to that practice.

I stress to my students the importance of learning to work with other people and design learning experiences that reflect the structures found in professional practice. This includes group work and collaborative learning experiences. This supports the constructivist approach in which knowledge is “constructed through discussion and consensus and hence is built by the participants rather than transferred or acquired”. (Demetrious, 2004)

I am a firm believer in applying into my teaching elements of problem-based learning, which is defined as “a method of learning in which learners encounter a problem, followed by a systematic, student-centred enquiry process”. (Barrows and Tamblyn, 1980, cited in Schwartz, Mennin and Webb, 2001, p2) As there is little evidence in the major academic literature of public relations teachers incorporating such techniques into courses I draw from across disciplines for guidance and ideas.

Smith (1985, p.115) stated that if students are presented with an authentic problem, a genuine desire for a solution will emerge and this will lead to active engagement in the learning process.

This builds on my knowledge that I acquired through various training programs in the 1980s when I worked in staff development roles of how adults learn. Smith (ibid.) summarises adults learning principles by stating:

“it is assumed that adult students possess knowledge already and problem solving capacities and that the most useful role for the teacher is a catalyst to aid in the process of discovery”.

I aim to plan learning experiences that encourage what Ramsden (1992, p. 167) calls “deep approaches to learning; these things imply dialogue, structured goals, and activity”. I agree with Ramsden and Gibbs’ critique of lecturing (Ibid. p. 153-154) and am working actively to instigate changes to the curriculum (CTS) documents for the communication courses that are structured around weekly lectures and tutorials that involve endless weekly student presentations. I relate on many levels to Ramsden’s discussion on the problems with this structure.

Many of my students are in a transitional stage as learners when school has just been left behind and university requirements are still unfolding. I am aware that my teaching needs to take into consideration the points made by Conrick (1994) that these students are used to relying on their teachers as the source of information, for the most part they do not challenge and the information imparted by the teacher is taken as “gospel”.

I believe that it is part of my teaching role to facilitate students’ transition into becoming independent learners. I also recognise that mature age students require support with study skills as they move back into a student role. Through using aspects of problem-based learning I aim to design and deliver valuable learning experiences for students.

I agree with Laurillard’s (1993, p28) statement that “because academics are concerned with how their subject is known, as well as what is known, teaching must not simply impart decontextualised knowledge, but must emulate the success of everyday learning by contextualising, situating knowledge in a real-world activity”.

In my teaching, I am aware of the, at times, antagonist approach of communication professionals, such as public relations practitioners and journalists, to academia. There is a tangible pull between the pressure to teach students practical skills that they will use in the workplace and the pressure to teach students the theoretical aspects of communication.

Kennedy (1990, cited in Hansen, 2005) believes that journalism education (which is integral to the Bachelor of Communication degree program and which many public relations students also major in), along with other disciplines such as social work, nursing, teaching and librarianship fall into a category of fields in which “educators are unable to agree on the knowledge bases or the appropriate pedagogy for their profession”.

In my teaching I try to integrate practical and theoretical aspects of public relations and the broader communication field, especially in facilitating student exploration about how theory and research findings can guide decision making related to practice.

In setting objectives for my courses, I can see that Bloom’s Taxonomy of Education Objectives could assist me to undertake this task in that there are factual, conceptual, procedural and metacognitive aspects to communication theory and practice. (Anderson, Krathwohl et al, 2001, p 45) In categorising objectives for my courses within the revised framework using the Taxonomy Table (ibid. p 28) I would be able to see “the integral relationship between knowledge and cognitive processes inherent in the objectives” (ibid. p.35)

Gower and Reber’s (2006) study of the preparedness of students for public relations practice indicated that there were areas where students felt under prepared for practice, such as in the area of business and managerial skills but there were also areas where students felt well prepared. By reviewing the objectives of the public relations major courses using the Taxonomy Table (Anderson, Krathwohl et al, 2001. p 28) I will be able to ascertain whether the courses are too focused on one dimension of the discipline and where subjects areas identified in the research by Gover and Reber and others in the field could be included in order to construct more meaningful learning experiences.

I am guided in my teaching and course development by the accreditation requirements of the Public Relations Institute of Australia. The course at the University of Newcastle currently does not meet to the criteria for accreditation and I aim over time to bring the program up to accreditation standard. I have developed some insight into how applying the principles and tools of the revised Bloom's Taxonomy of Education Objectives (Anderson, Krathwohl et al, 2001) could assist in this process.

It is acknowledged that constituting subject matter for teaching is a "vexed question", and one which should be focused on before considering how teachers should approach their teaching. (Martin, Prosser, Trigwell, Ramsden and Benjamin, 2000, p. 409).

In practice, I have found that considering subject matter for teaching and considering how I will teach that subject matter is undertaken concurrently. I am constantly evaluating my teaching practice in terms of what is working in the classroom and feedback from students alongside of considering what I'm teaching, what changes need to be made prior to teaching the courses next time and what is happening both in professional practice and the academic literature.

I get extreme satisfaction from seeing students making connections with subject matter and producing quality work in their assignments. I love sharing the "Eureka" moments when students "get it". I value very much the learning experience that is provided to me through teaching in the communication program.

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