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# Educational Philosophy and Practice:

What is the Role of the Ideal in Curriculum Design?

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# Abstract

My paper is an examination of my own education of philosophy and how it has changed over the past 14 years. It examines the role that philosophy plays in my day to day teaching, how theory informs practice.

# Educational Philosophy and Practice:

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Introduction:

It’s strange how life tends to move in circles. I read Montaigne’s “Of the Education of Children” for the first time 14 years ago and, perhaps not coincidentally, it was in order to write a paper on my own philosophy of education. When I started that paper I had already been teaching ESL for three or four years and, like most men in their late twenties, I thought I knew everything.

I wrote that my future classroom was going to be an amazing place where the children behaved like angels while they cultivated their imaginations in the process of learning new skill after new skill. My students would be fully engaged in their learning and thanks to my brilliant teaching, each and every one of them were going to be fantastically successful. They would become knowledgeable, socially savvy, enlightened boys and girls.

It was a fairy tale.

I can laugh about my naivety now, but our fantasies tend to reveal our values as well as our collective hopes and aspirations. Articulating these hopes and aspirations are the essential first steps in creating a philosophy of education, which is to say I believe every educational endeavor must begin with the end in mind.

Curricula Change as Ideals Change

What sort of adults do we want our children to become? What sort of qualities should they possess? What skills must they master? In Montaigne’s day, reason, rhetoric, foreign languages, fitness and etiquette constituted the essential skills. Knowledge, logic, virtue, strength and fitness were the qualities of his idealized gentleman (Montainge, 1580). For much of the 19th and 20th century education was designed with bureaucracy and business in mind and the essential skills included reading, handwriting and basic numeracy (Sugata, 2013). Now, with the rapid advancement of technology the matter is once again up for debate, though most agree that creative and critical thinking, communication and collaboration skills as well as technological savvy will be essential for the adults of tomorrow. These are the curricular goals.

If the curricular goals are the destination at the end of the journey then you can think of the years as signposts along the way. Every day in school is an individual step. So while a teacher knows that he wants a child to be able to think critically about what she reads, before that he must teach her to read and today that means having her discover that “b” is the sound at the start of “blue”, “bear” and “boom”. In the educational literature this is referred to as Learning by Design or Backwards design.

Practice:

While philosophy provides educators with a map of where we hope to go with our students, I have learned that teachers are not the only ones doing the driving. As one experienced teacher put it to me, “the children are always highly motivated to learn, but not necessarily motivated to learn what you are teaching”.

When I first entered the profession I suffered from a number of illusions. I believed that students of the same age would have similar skills and abilities. Furthermore, I believed that the content of what I taught was essential information for each and every one of my students. I took as a personal failing on my part when my students were unable or unwilling to retain information that I shared with them. It was a self-important, egocentric point of view.

The more experience I gained, the more I came to understand what was meant by the phrase “student centred learning”. Here was a philosophy of education that understood from the outset that the homogenous classroom was a myth and accepted that students wouldn’t all be interested and engaged in learning the same things. This changed my job significantly as I realized that the bulk of my work lay in the development and curation of resources for students. My identity as a teacher was not to lead students down the prescribed path but to guide students so that they discover it on their own.

Conclusion:

As I stand on the cusp of becoming an online educator, I feel like the lessons I have learned in the classroom will serve me well. For starters, I am prepared to say with certainty that I don’t know what my classroom will be like because I don’t yet know what or where or even who I will be teaching. However, the OLTD program has taught me that there really isn’t a big difference between learning online and learning face to face. I know that it is vital to build relationships both between me and my students and between the students themselves. There learning will be individualized and my task as an educator is to guide their discovery and help them assess their learning (Rourke, L., Anderson, T. Garrison, D. R., & Archer, W. 2001).

There is still a big picture of course. There my goal for my student is both more ambitious but less prescriptive. I want them to create meaningful experiences for themselves. Their learning should give them joy and satisfaction throughout their journey which, I’ve come to realize, is endless.

# References

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# 18 Jan 2015

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