

2019

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Judith Platania

Roger Williams University, jplatania@rwu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Platania, J. (2019). Reflecting on the Context of a Teaching Philosophy. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 53 (1).

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Reflecting on the Context of a Teaching Philosophy

Judith Platania, Roger Williams University, RI

Judith Platania, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology and delivers foundation classes to graduate and undergraduate students majoring in psychology.

Abstract

Teaching experience is only valuable when we reflect on our practices as professors. This reflection should expand our realization of the challenges we face in the classroom. As faculty, we have an obligation to our students and to ourselves to participate in continued assessment of our teaching philosophy. Not only is it important to do so from a pedagogical perspective, it reminds us of our responsibility to inform our students through evidence-based practices and the science of our respective disciplines.

Overview

During my first year as a full-time assistant professor, I attended a three-day faculty workshop that focused on teaching in adult and higher education. As a new faculty member and someone with a stronger graduate training in research compared to teaching, I was excited at the possibility of gaining insight into how to refine my approach to teaching. Throughout the weekend workshop I learned the importance of not only discovering a personal teaching philosophy but also how to utilize this newfound philosophy as a foundation for structuring my courses. Importantly, I also learned that key to developing a teaching philosophy was contending with important questions, such as: *What does it mean for learning to occur? What is the role of understanding in learning? What is the relationship between teaching and learning?* Reflecting on how to respond to these questions has guided me through the process of developing and refining my personal teaching philosophy. Twenty-three years later, I remain mindful of and committed to my philosophy of teaching, which has expanded to include three fundamental elements: (1) challenging students to develop higher-order thinking and reasoning through theory and research; (2) connecting learning to prior knowledge; and (3) balancing flexibility with rigor in the classroom and in research. Each element is important in the context of an overall perspective, however as a psychologist, I have focused on conceptualizing each element in the context of psychology as a discipline. With this in mind, in a recent report addressing improving teaching and learning in psychology, Chew and colleagues (2018) identify key areas in which psychologists fall short as effective teachers. In this report, these psychologists stress the importance of a well-defined model of classroom effectiveness. This model encourages those who teach psychology to think about their own teaching in the context of empirically based methodologies. In the next sections I describe the fundamental elements of my teaching

philosophy and address a few of the key areas identified in Chew, et. al., as those in need of change. In doing so, I hope to motivate others to re-examine their teaching philosophies through the lens of science in an effort to improve *psychological literacy* (Cranney & Dunn, 2011).

Elements of a Teaching Philosophy

Challenging students to develop higher-order thinking and reasoning through theory and research. It is no surprise that researchers have devoted a great deal of time and effort in demonstrating the benefits of inspiring higher order thinking through theoretically informed literature (see Maclellan & Soden, 2012). The underlying premise is that teaching from a theoretical perspective helps students form a sound, in-depth understanding of course-specific constructs. Once a clear understanding is formed, students can begin to critically think about and discuss these constructs. However, guiding students through this process is challenging as it requires patience on the part of the teacher and practice on the part of the student. This can be especially challenging in courses such as research methods and experimental psychology - those that do not generally lend themselves well to this type of learning. In order to meet these challenges, a great deal of time and effort has been dedicated to examining and re-examining the learning outcomes of each of my courses through a theoretical lens.

Thinking theoretically involves asking different kinds of questions - by and large those that begin with *why* as opposed to *what*. To fully understand how theories are developed, students must shift their approach to how they think and learn. In fact, students' thinking must directly reflect the approach to theory development - it must be dynamic, incorporating process and allowing for new ways to conceptualize phenomena (Borgatti, 1996). In my experience, this is an unfamiliar process for undergraduates, resulting principally from a lack of training in how to do so. However, once students become skilled in how to think theoretically, they advance to learning how to connect theory to research and practice. As an applied experimental psychologist with training in psychology and law, I value the importance of connecting theory to research and practice. Over the years, research conducted by legal psychologists has led to significant gains in policy issues; for example, eyewitness identification and child testimony. I often refer to these examples (and others) to highlight the importance of the *real-world* implications of experimental research. Importantly, I have discovered that my training and experience in conducting empirical research has directly informed my teaching, which benefits both undergraduate and graduate students.

Connecting learning to prior knowledge. Providing students with a context for learning allows them to construct personal meaning, practice the skills in a similar context, and demonstrate that they have mastered the skills in different contexts. However, fostering a learning environment can be difficult when students' prior knowledge is varied both in terms of topic-specific knowledge as well as the depth of knowledge across topics. Again, courses in research methods and experimental psychology do not readily lend themselves to this type of learning. As a result, students in these courses need assistance in developing personal meaning. Once personal meaning is construed, finding ways to bridge personal meaning with course-related information can be challenging. However, when students discover this relationship they appreciate the role it plays in learning. In research methods in particular, it's important to accomplish this early in the semester. The assignment of an APA-style research paper with multiple opportunities for

submitting drafts helps students develop this connection between prior knowledge and learning. Students who have mastered control of this assignment exhibit an increased sense of confidence.

In experimental psychology, I provide students with the tools they need to analyze and assess the experimental research process in psychology. I start by asking them to consider how behavior is studied in order to develop learning context. Prior knowledge is activated when they can understand and personally connect how each step of the research process shapes the science of psychology. They are then guided from a basic understanding to identifying the importance of the context and flow of the process. Students recognize the strengths and weaknesses of each step involved from observation to analysis to forming conclusions. I have found that the more personal the context the more capable they are of learning. Finally, as a group they execute a research project addressing a hypothesis formed from an empirical research question utilizing the experimental methodology. Individually, they submit a final report including all components of a research paper (abstract, literature review, method, etc.) in manuscript format. These activities/assignments promote the idea that enhancing the development of schemas can lead to improvements in long-term memory recall and assist in the transfer of information beyond the context of the classroom (Chew, et. al., 2018; Nilson, 2016).

Balancing flexibility with rigor in the classroom and in research. One of the most important lessons I have learned as a professor is the importance of balancing flexibility with rigor when teaching as well as when working with students in research. It is vital for teachers to be cognizant of maintaining a balance between content expertise and the ability to adapt to varying levels of learning. I believe one of the better measures of assessing how well you are performing in the classroom is the extent to which you, as a professor, considers the varied levels of student learning and remain mindful of these levels when teaching. A supportive classroom environment will stimulate learning. Further, researchers have found that students' learning is enhanced when support is provided (Baeten, Dochy, & Struynen, 2013). One of the best ways we can provide support is through flexibility. When we present an atmosphere of support we send a message to our students that we are willing to extend ourselves to ensure that our students are performing to a particular standard. However, at the same time we must ensure that we do not compromise these standards. Establishing and maintaining the balance between flexibility and rigor is one of the most important determinants of successful teaching.

Conclusion

Twenty-three years ago, I was fortunate to attend a workshop that focused on developing pedagogy. Taking advantage of that opportunity has allowed me to reflect on my teaching philosophy and remain mindful of my commitment to my pedagogical view. This type of opportunity however, is not available to many faculty. In fact, recent data reveals a relatively small number of centers for teaching and learning at the national level compared to the total number of colleges and universities (as cited in Chew, et. al., 2018). In order for our perspectives on teaching to expand and for reflection to take place, faculty need guidance and continued discussion from those involved in teaching and learning centers.

My motivation for sharing my reflections was the *manifesto* presented by Chew and colleagues (2018) calling for psychologists to “transform the way the field as a whole views teaching” (p. 240). The purpose of these reflections is to signal a need for others begin to reflect on their own

teaching philosophies and to refine and redefine as necessary. We have an obligation to our students and to ourselves to participate in this process. Not only is it important to do so from a pedagogical perspective, it reminds us of our responsibility to inform our students through evidence-based practices and the science of our respective disciplines.

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In a recent study, Blazer and Kraft demonstrate impressive effect sizes to explain the predictive ability of students' self-reported attitudes and behaviors on learning outcomes. Focusing on self-efficacy in the context of math skills, this report is one of the first to identify teaching attributes in this context.

- DeHouwer, J., Barnes-Holmes, D., & Moors, A. (2013). What is learning? On the nature and merits of a functional definition of learning. *Psychonomic Bulletin Review*, 20, 631-642

https://ppw.kuleuven.be/okp/_pdf/DeHouwer2013WILOT.pdf

This insightful review provides the reader with an expanded definition of *learning*. This definition introduces the concept of *moderated learning effects*, i.e., broadening our understanding of learning to include important contextual influences on behavior.

- Hackathorn, J., Solomon, E. D., Blankmeyer, K. L., Tennial, R. E., & Garczynski, A. M. (2011). Learning by doing: An empirical study of active teaching techniques. *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, 11(2), 40-54

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/e85e/6afc1ab9e16154b19d974e6012425169282b.pdf>

An empirical investigation into the role of teaching techniques on learning, this study used a repeated-measure design to examine the relative efficacy of four techniques on assessment. They offer significant insight into the pros and cons of each technique (lecture, demonstration, discussion, in-class activities).

Perkins, D. (1993). Teaching for understanding. *American Educator: The Professional Journal of the American Federation of Teachers*, 17, 28-35

https://www.ghaea.org/files/IowaCoreCurriculum/Module2/Teaching_for_Understanding_Perkins_article.pdf

In this article, the author deliberates the construct of *understanding* as a critical measure of learning. He provides a timely review of perceptions of pedagogy in this context and encourages teachers to engage in reflection on this important construct.

Sequeira, A. H. (2012). Introduction to concepts of teaching and learning.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272620585_INTRODUCTION_TO_CONCEPTS_OF_TEACHING_AND_LEARNING

A comprehensive overview of the theoretical models of learning. This author compels the reader to examine the process of learning as an important component in reflection on teaching, stressing the importance of guided training to enable efficient teaching.