
MY TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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The heart of my teaching philosophy can be captured in the distinction between *teacher-centered learning* and *student-centered learning*. My approach to the art of teaching is inspired by the concept of *student-centered learning*.

Student-centered Learning vs. Teacher-centered Learning

Teacher-centered learning is the orthodox approach to education based on the notion that information needs to be transferred “from above” in a didactic manner from the teacher, who is seen as the repository of knowledge, to the students, who are typically seen as the recipients of information. Under this orthodox approach the transfer of information is unidirectional (i.e., teacher-to-student) and the style of information apprehension expected of students may be represented by the metaphor of a brain needing to be “filled” with information and received wisdom.

In contrast, student-centered learning is a dynamic approach to education based on the conviction that the teacher has a responsibility to facilitate the acquisition and generation of knowledge by students themselves. Student-centered learning is also based on the conviction that the actual learning of students, rather than just the accurate articulation of information or expert-knowledge by the teacher, is what really matters. Under the student-centered approach, knowledge transfer is multi-directional (i.e., teacher-to-student, student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and may also involve knowledge transfer from those outside the classroom); and students are expected to be active learners, not passive receivers of information. Some educators therefore refer to this approach as “active learning” to differentiate it from the didactic orientation of teacher-centered learning. Student-centered learning emphasizes skill development, the application of knowledge, the integration of knowledge from different sources and domains, knowledge-generation, and the facilitation of life-long learning. This contrasts with the rote-learning that is often associated with teacher-centered learning.

While student-centered learning is perhaps typically portrayed as a progressive approach to education, it is by no means unique to contemporary thinkers. For example, the great American educationist John Dewey, in a book written over ninety years ago, made the following observation which has been reiterated by many others since Dewey's time: “Teaching can be compared to selling commodities. No one can sell unless someone buys. We should ridicule a merchant who said that he had sold a great many goods although no one had bought any. But perhaps there are teachers who think they have done a good day's teaching irrespective of what pupils have learned. There is the same exact equation between teaching and learning that there is between selling and buying.”¹

Dewey's comments reflect my own sentiments: a quality education will generally focus on the actual learning of students rather than the putative delivery of expert information and opinion by teachers.

The focus on *student-centered learning* rather than teacher-centered learning that is the foundation of my philosophy of teaching has led me to embrace a number of other important themes and practices as an educator, the most salient of which are highlighted below.

Education for Judgment in Technological Innovation

I believe that an important goal of management education—whether in the domain of technological innovation, or business more generally—is for students to be empowered to *practice* the art of management. Learning about management of technological innovation (or of business more generally) is not enough; students ought to link knowledge with practice, through education.

With this in mind, it may be argued that management education should cultivate the ability of students to make judgments about technological or business situations as part of developing prowess in decision-making and strategy formation. This concept of *education for judgment* has been championed by C. Roland Christensen and others at the Harvard Business School and has led to the prominence of discussion-teaching and, in particular, the case-discussion method for which that School is renowned.² Case-discussion teaching features prominently in my own teaching, partly because it is a fitting counterpart to the concept of education for judgment, but also because it is a natural extension of the idea of student-centered learning that lies at the heart of my whole teaching philosophy.

The case-discussion teaching method has been characterized as follows by its exponents at Harvard: “The case method is a form of instructor-guided, discussion-based learning. It introduces complex and often ambiguous real-world scenarios into the classroom, typically through case study with a protagonist facing an important decision. The case method represents a shift from the traditional, instructor-centered model of education to a participant-centered one in which students play a lead role in their own and each other's learning. Case method instructors use questions, dialogue, debate, and the application of analytical tools and frameworks to engage students in a challenging, interactive learning environment. Not only does this approach raise the likelihood of greater retention: it also allows for learning that goes beyond the transfer of knowledge to include the development of analytical, decision-making, and communication skills, and the cultivation of self-awareness, judgment, and the capacity to lead.”³

I have been practicing the “Harvard style” case method of teaching for over three decades and have developed my own approach to applying the method in different contexts, including those contexts where students are not typically exposed to authentic case-teaching in the classroom or where the culture of the school has not historically been supportive of case teaching. I have also experimented with a variety of assessment techniques to complement and enhance the case method as a teaching vehicle, based on the notion that assessment methods ought to be seen as a tool to facilitate student-centered learning, not just as a vehicle to evaluate students' performance and to produce grades. Case-discussion teaching is typically appropriate for capstone courses in MBA programs, where the focus is on strategic management; and this is where I have employed the method most heavily. However, I have also employed the method in teaching other subjects, such as technology entrepreneurship, management of technology, intellectual property management and technology transfer, and I have found that it can be educationally powerful in those settings if properly managed.

Matching Pedagogy with Learning Goals and Context

A third principle that forms part of my philosophy of teaching is the idea that there is a variety of legitimate and potentially powerful pedagogies available for use in management education and that an excellent professional teacher will typically be adept in more than one pedagogy. More importantly, we ought to recognize that some pedagogies work better in some settings than others, and that some pedagogies may be totally inappropriate in certain contexts. When selecting pedagogy for a course we ought to avoid simply adopting a pedagogy with which we are personally most experienced, but should instead try to match the pedagogy to the learning goals and context of the course in question.

Thus, while I have tended over the years to be an enthusiastic exponent of case teaching, I nevertheless have been careful to employ a variety of teaching methods (other than case teaching) for the variety of courses for which I have been responsible. The context of a course includes not only the educational outcomes expected of students, but also the position of the course in the curriculum of the program, the culture of the school, the background of the students, the time-constraints of the classroom setting, and many other things, including the culture of the society, country or community in which the teaching takes place. In addition to “old fashioned lecturing” (which, notwithstanding what I have said about case teaching, does still form an important part of my own pedagogical repertoire), my teaching has included techniques and activities such as: role plays, team games, group research projects, individual research projects, field projects, negotiation exercises, business-planning projects, classroom debates and even interactive movie critiques and book discussions. In recent years I have also experimented with a variety of modalities for online education, and with the use of digital platforms to support face-to-face learning and hybrid online/face-to-face learning.

Problem Based Learning

An educational concept that has been very influential in my own teaching, and that has strong affinity with the themes of student-centered learning and education-for-judgment, is what has come to be known as Problem Based Learning (“PBL”).⁴ The essential idea here is that students may learn principles, theories, techniques and skills by grappling with practical problems and by trying to make sense of the factors that constitute the problems as they seek solutions to the problems. This approach can be used concurrently with a variety of other methods, including case discussions, role-plays, group research projects and business-planning projects. Problem Based Learning essentially takes a practical problem as the starting point for theory development, in contrast to more conventional approaches to teaching that tend to start with theory and then move towards application and the challenges of applying theory. In the conventional approach, analysis of problems tends to be seen as a way of illustrating the application of theory; whereas in Problem Based Learning, problems themselves are employed as the stimulus for discovering and comprehending theory. In a sense, the process of learning in the two contrasting approaches moves in opposite directions.

Problem Based Learning is an approach to education that can be found not just in management or business education, but also in professional fields such as medicine, law, architecture or engineering. Problem Based Learning is also eminently appropriate for education in the art of technological innovation, where education for a practical career is at least as important as education for knowledge as such.

Designing Assessment as an Integral Part of Pedagogy

Wherever possible, I treat assessment techniques within my courses as an integral part of pedagogy. In other words, I consciously use the design of assessment exercises to facilitate and stimulate learning, in accordance with the desired educational goals of a course. I believe that it is important for the informal signals that students receive about what really matters in a course (in order to “get a good grade”) to accord with whatever it is to which the instructor really wants the students to devote their time and attention.

In a number of universities where I have taught I have observed a sad situation where an instructor designs a course to emphasize learning activities such as classroom discussion or team-work but, in the interests of objectivity, assigns an exam or an individual written assignment as the primary assessment item. Students quickly work out that preparing for the exam or writing the essay is what really matters, rather than spending time preparing-for and engaging-in the main educational substance of the course. This kind of problem is especially common where case-discussion teaching is intended to be a primary element of a course.

To address this problem, I have developed over the years a number of techniques for objectively and systematically evaluating the performance of students in classroom case discussions. This has made case teaching a much more powerful tool for student-learning in my courses where I make use of case teaching. Additionally, in some courses (where it is appropriate and feasible to do so), I produce “real time” feedback on students’ verbal and written work as a means for providing customized guidance for the learning process throughout the course. I have also experimented with novel approaches to peer evaluation in courses where either team-work or active participation by students in classroom activities is an important part of the pedagogy.

Use of Information Technology as a Tool to Facilitate Learning

I seek to use information technology, such as online learning platforms, multimedia resources or data-base software for course management and customized feedback, wherever it appears appropriate and productive to do so. A key principle to which I try to adhere is that the choice of instructional technology or other information technology to support education should match the pedagogy, assessment-design, learning goals and context of the course and the students. I have published a paper on the “Virtualization of University Education” that addresses some of the lessons I have learned about this topic, both as a teacher and as an educational administrator.⁵

The general principle that the choice of information technology should be appropriate to the educational context is actually just good common sense. However, ensuring that this principle is actually embraced in practice is difficult, and success requires both conscious effort and diligence.

Values and People in Education

Finally, above and beyond discussion of methods and approaches to teaching, I think it is imperative to remember that as teachers it is our calling and purpose to help our students to fulfill their dreams and hopes through learning ... and, on top of that, to help prepare them to be good citizens of both the World and their local communities. This higher purpose of education cannot be properly fulfilled through a focus on classroom techniques, pedagogical formulae or curriculum designs. Rather, in the end, it requires idealistic and committed teachers who really care about students as individual persons and as a community of individuals ... and to express that care through genuine person-centered effort. In short, teachers need to be passionate about helping students to learn and to fulfill their dreams.

I am a teacher because it is my “calling” ... it is my profession, it is who I am. I love to help students to learn.

When a teacher is imbued with the passion of helping students to learn then it becomes natural for he or she (as a teacher) to want to help students link their formal learning, both inside the classroom and outside the classroom, to the development of their careers. This is especially important in business schools or management schools—or perhaps engineering schools—where education is often more consciously linked to career development than it might be in the liberal arts. This expression of care for helping students to discover personally satisfying pathways for developing their careers has always played a big part of my life as a teacher.

I also believe that management education can be a marvelous setting for learning about the practical issues of being ethical in a messy real-world context. While, on one hand, the subjects of ethics in general and business ethics or engineering ethics in particular provide rich fodder for explicit learning as a discrete and formal component of the curriculum in an educational program, on the other hand they are also subjects that lend themselves to implicit learning as part of the total educational experience. It seems to me that educators have a special responsibility to facilitate learning about ethics by infusing the curriculum and the overall experience of students with an ethics-rich sensibility. In short, I believe that as business teachers we have a duty to facilitate tacit learning about ethics in business by our students through the manner in which we frame and address the formal subject matter of whichever course we teach. We should not leave learning about ethics to courses with official titles such as “business ethics” or “engineering ethics.” I believe that our true values as educators will be usually somehow be recognized by students, tacitly or otherwise, and that those perceived values may play an important role in assisting students to cultivate their understanding of ethics for their own careers in business, whether as an entrepreneur or as an employee of an established enterprise.

In summary, my philosophy of teaching is grounded-in and inspired-by the idea of student-centered learning. I have developed a variety of pedagogies and have experimented with various techniques derived explicitly from my commitment to that idea. However, in the end, it is the passion of a teacher for education, the integrity with which a teacher approaches the practical tasks of teaching, and the love that a teacher expresses for helping students to learn, that provide the most valuable and lasting contribution. Excellent techniques and innovative methods will never be an adequate substitute for the human factor in the teacher-student relationship, or a substitute for the love of learning, whether the setting is the physical classroom or the virtual classroom.

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¹ John Dewey, *How We Think* (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1933), 35-36.

² C. Roland Christensen, et al., *Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 1991).

³ Source: <http://www.hbs.edu/teaching/case-method-in-practice/core-principles.html> (last accessed on 3 May 2011).

⁴ P. Hallinger & E. M. Bridges, *A Problem-based Approach for Management Education: Preparing Managers for Action* (Berlin: Springer, 2007).

⁵ Kelvin W. Willoughby, “The virtualization of university education: Concepts, strategies and business models,” *Journal of Applied Educational Technology*, 2, 1 (2004), 4-24.