

Two Big Ideas on Teaching and Learning

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It often feels as if there are only two ways to teach and learn. Of course, this is not true, as there are many, many ways of teaching and learning. However, we have all been touched by the following *two big ideas*, which seem to influence most classrooms. These ideas have been ebbing and flowing through North American classrooms for more than 100 years. It is as if there is a continuum of evolving ideas, which informs our teaching and learning.

These two big ideas have a wide range of language used to describe them, which causes great confusion. For example, often they are referred to as the two sides of the reading wars, a debate which has lasted more than 100 years (Smith, 1992).

Sometimes these ideas are embedded in our consciousness and our own personal history; sometimes these ideas become hidden assumptions, which drive educational policy. As professionals, we are all called upon to reflect on our own experiences and articulate how these ideas have influenced us. Are these long-held (and sometimes unexamined assumptions) valid for the 21st century? What principles drive our practice today? What principles should drive our practice today?

The purpose of this short paper is to summarize two large bodies of educational thought, each of which has had a profound effect in the last 100 years. In addition, I will link these two schools of thought to the five primary educational foundational constructs. In addition, I will draw connections to prevailing psychological perspectives.

For our purposes, I will refer to foundations, theories, perspectives, philosophies, approaches, schools of thought, and even ideas as if they all mean exactly the same thing—of course, they do not; differences will become more apparent with more study. My purpose is to tightly capture some complex ideas in order to make them more meaningful for teachers and learners.

We can never assume that there are only two approaches to teaching and learning; however, the following two broad categories are reflective of experiences most of us have had in our own learning.

Two Big Ideas

Think of the following two perspectives as *Two Big Ideas*, which influence schools. This provides an anchor for our further discussions, as we look deeper into the complexities of teaching and learning. After a discussion of these two big ideas, we will extend our learning to *Three Big Ideas* and *Four Big Ideas*. Eventually, we will see that teaching and learning is a continuum of evolving ideas through time.

One of the problems with these theories is that they have many names in the literature. In what follows, I am using only a few of the terms. As we progress, we will see that these big ideas have lots of words used to refer to similar ideas.

Classical Theory of Teaching and Learning

Meaning-centered, Student-centered, or Comprehension-based

The Classical Theory began with the *Sages of the Ages*. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were the first to believe that children learn better when they are active in learning; experiential, hands-on pedagogical processes stimulate intrinsic learning. Students create knowledge as they interact with ideas, the curriculum, and each other. Vygotsky and his notion of social dialectical learning and Socratic dialogue, in addition to Dewey were disciples of this theory in the early 20th century. In this model of teaching and learning, the teacher is sometimes referred to as “the guide on the side.”

Progressivism

Progressivism lies under the umbrella of Classical Theory. It involves students learning through experience and is very student-centered. When creating curriculum, the teacher knows the students' needs and interests, and bases the curriculum on this knowledge. This allows learning to become interesting and meaningful for students, and the teacher facilitates the learning.

Existentialism

Existentialism is also a part of Classical Theory, as students are the center of learning, and they are challenged to construct their own knowledge, becoming responsible for what is learned. Individual interests of children are taken into account and used to create meaningful curriculum.

Reconstructivism

Another example of Classical Theory is reconstructionism; it also is interactive, meaningful learning, but does not confine itself to the classroom; it extends learning to the community outside of the classroom. Students are involved with in-depth questions and reflect upon what is being learned. Through this process students learn, relearn, and unlearn, which creates an entirely new level of understanding of curriculum and how learning relates to life. The teacher creates the context, which is inquiry-based and connected with self and social transformation.

Words. Words. Words.

Other words associated with the Classical Theory of teaching and learning are: organic, interactive, constructive, contextualized, holistic, progressive, student-centered, social reconstruction, transformative pedagogy, a focus on social, cultural, historical, and political context, and even critical pedagogy.

Official Theory of Teaching and Learning

Memory-centered, Teacher-centered, or Skills-based learning

The idea of the Official School of Thought has been around for many decades, although not as long as the Classical Approach. This theory of learning is based on the idea that children are blank slates waiting for instruction and are inactive recipients of knowledge. Many consider this the “traditional” way of teaching and learning; many feel that this is how it has always been done, and this is true for the last 100 years in North America. The Official Theory of Learning has had dominance for much of the past century, and it is the foundation of the present No Child Left Behind. Some refer to this approach to teaching as *the sage on stage*.

Essentialism

Essentialism is a teacher-centered approach, which focuses on extrinsic learning, reasoning, and memorization. The environment is controlled by the teacher. Essentialism is closely aligned with the back-to-the-basics movement and behaviorism. The role of the teacher is to transmit an “essential” body of knowledge.

Perennialism

Perennialism places value on timeless ideas and “great books,” with an emphasis on reading a specific body of lasting books, often containing traditional historical and moral values. Students are encouraged to thinking rationally and to develop a logical mind. This school of thought believes that there is a reoccurring knowledge that all students should have and that information is derived from great works of literature.

Words. Words. Words.

Other words associated with the Official Theory of Teaching and Learning are: memorization, management scientific, scientific, traditional, scripted, leveled, transmission, and behaviorism.

Summary

These 5 *isms* form the core of educational foundations and are heavily influenced (and confused with) the psychological foundations, which often include behaviorism, positivism, empiricism, cognitivism, constructivism, and humanism. Of course, classrooms are influenced by far more than the theories or foundations of education or psychology, but what is summarized here is a shared body of knowledge, which teacher educators are expected to know and be able to articulate.

A word about behaviorism as it has been a dominant force this century. Behaviorism posits that learning is a change in behavior. Learning must be very concrete and based on things children can see and touch. Behaviorists such as Skinner and Pavlov used animals to prove their theories. Both scientists used rewards and punishments to motivate learning and to raise the frequency of correct answers. In today's society, this style of teaching is seen in many classrooms and is related to the Official Theory. Teacher directed learning, memorization, and standardized testing are examples of this approach to teaching and learning.

I have no illusions about solving the problems of the educational debates, nor the reading wars, but I am very interested in helping teachers find their way through these demanding and complex political times. Part of my answer is found in the “whispering of the juxtaposition” (Wink, 2005, pp. 10-16), which calls me to listen harder and hear better to the other.

References

In writing this short summary, I am indebted to the work of James Atherton, Frank Smith, and Steve Krashen. Frank first coined the phrase "Official and Classic Theories;" I have simply changed his classic to classical, as I noted the students in my classes seemed to make more sense of the word, classical; Frank has also noted the longevity of the "reading wars;" I notice that students feel relieved when they discover that this argument is about 100 years old. Steve consistently talks about comprehension-based and skills-based, which I also have noticed that students understand. James Atherton has wonderful foundational ideas captured in graphics and language on his generous web site.

Thanks!

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