

WHAT IS TEACHING FOR?¹

By Hendra Gunawan

I could teach my dog how to whistle, but I guess —however hard I try— my dog would not learn. I cannot then call it teaching, can I? If one insists to consider it teaching, it should be categorized as bad teaching.

Everybody would agree that the main task of a teacher at school is teaching. But what is teaching for? Is it just for fulfilling the task? Or is it for transferring knowledge or information to the students, as many people would say? What if the students do not learn at all?

Teaching, in the sense of transferring information, is relatively an easy job. What is more difficult is to make students learn, process and do something with the information presented to them, and think about it further. So, the main issue is not what is taught and how sophisticated it is taught, but do the students learn or not. Teaching is wasting time if students do not learn anything.

Good teaching should make students learn. Moreover, it should encourage students to learn by themselves, even when the teaching is not taking place. Student learning is the main activity, and so students —not the teacher— must become the main actors.

If our students are all eager to learn, then we —perhaps— should not teach at all. We might just provide them books or the material and let them learn by themselves. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. In most cases, we are faced with students who would not automatically learn if we do not do something to make them learn.

One says that students would learn if they are motivated. In other words, motivation is the key to student learning. Some students might have their intrinsic motivation, but most of them might not. In the latter case, we have no other choice than to motivate them. But how?

There are many things that can motivate students to learn. Some students might be motivated to learn if they are afraid or threatened. A student will study hard if he or she fears some untoward consequence of failing. Parental pressure often causes such fear. Fear is a great motivator, but —beware— it can also become counter productive. One thing for sure, it is not wise for a teacher to strike fear into the student's heart.

Some students would be motivated to learn if they need to know the material, for instance if they are told that it will be on the next test. However, learning is not just about passing the examinations.

Many students will also be motivated to learn if they experience success in their learning, in understanding a concept or doing things that they learn. In most cases, students will be reluctant to continue for fear of future failure if they experience once. Thus experiencing success in learning is important.

However, would it be better if the students are motivated to learn because they perceive the material to be relevant or they can relate the material to their life experience or —the best of all— because they find the material interesting.

Hence the very first thing a teacher should do when he or she is teaching is to motivate the students to learn, for instance by showing them that the material he or she is going to present is relevant or interesting. As Donald Norman put it in his 1993 book *Things That Make Us Smart*: ‘...the trick in teaching is to entice and motivate the student into excitement and interest in the topic...’ Of course the teacher should have adequate mastery of the material. But then he or she should also know its relevance or—whenever possible—what is interesting about it.

It is not hard, for example, to find that music is interesting. But do we know what is interesting about mathematics, say? For some people, mathematics is, indeed, interesting too. To know that the material is interesting, we need—for instance—to read and find out more about it. Knowing a little about the history often helps us to have something interesting to tell our students.

To summarize, the main task of a teacher at school is nothing but to facilitate student learning. Motivation turns out to be the key, and so the problem is how to motivate the students to learn. Once the students have been motivated, one can start presenting basic concepts and information, giving exercises, and providing enough time for exploration and reflection. One may then expect that the students will learn something. That is what teaching is for.

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