

# **Educational Philosophy: Cognition and Advantage**

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## **Preface:**

I have had occasion to craft several documents relating to broad and not-so-broad discussions of educational philosophy. These have been directed at institutions, accreditation, personal perspective, and general theorizing. Over the past years I have written philosophies for a technology center; the technology plan for the University of Montana Western; a statement about the place of technology in education for an NCATE visit; a theory that in minimalist/reductionist perspective observed how teachers construct environments that encourage internalized, scaffolded assistance; a teaching history and philosophy for entrance into Harvard; and several other papers that try to deconstruct the cognitive interaction of individuals, place, and tools as they influence those illusive ghosts of learning, thinking, understanding and creating. ([www.kvalvik.org/papers](http://www.kvalvik.org/papers)) While I welcome an opportunity to revisit some of these thoughts, I also must preface with the comment that this narrative will serve to raise many more questions than it presumes to answer. As a teacher of many years I find that the student in me has more questions than the teacher in me has answers. This paper is about those questions.

## **Experts in the Human Condition:**

As I begin yet another of these tours through my perspective on the subject of teaching philosophy I first consider the fact that although educational theorists like Bloom, Vygotsky, Gardner, Papert, Skinner, Piaget, and for that matter Plato and Aristotle had much to say on the matter, the discussion of learning and knowing might be as well addressed by Dylan Thomas, John Donne, and Samuel Becket as by these “educators.” Perhaps the human condition and understanding, broadly, is more thoroughly visited by Manet, Mozart or Alvin Ailey, than by the hundreds of standard quotes about knowing that are referenced by teachers to explain teaching. The point here is to initially state that it is my growing belief that compartmentalizing education into a specific discipline (i.e. to look at the process of teaching and learning as some distinct activity that may be parsed from living generally) may be a bit anachronistic. The distinction is not always helpful. The very effort of dissecting education from the broader and more natural perspective might imply that the whole is indeed the sum of its parts.

## **Colleges of Education**

The partitions that separate colleges of education from those of business, science, history and others often seem a bit artificial. Perhaps using a different model for the field of education would be helpful. The concept of teaching subtracted from content and context carries almost no meaning whatsoever. I would argue that it is not a type of media or vessel that may contain the subject of one’s choosing. To say one teaches high school, for instance, is to also imply a fairly specific body of knowledge and course of study. Teaching methods in this context are specialized in regard to behavior modification, marketing, internal politics and current standardized assessment criteria to list only a few.

If one teaches kindergarten the techniques are also specialized and content specific. Likewise community-college taxidermy, freshman composition at the college level, elementary pottery and so on. Each teaching assignment carries with it a set of stated or implied contextual parameters that dictate appropriate and successful teaching behaviors. Of course, elementary teachers, and high school teachers have long been given a distinct tool bag to use in the field with distinct classes directed toward their intended clientele. Meanwhile, those going into the university classroom, are often given no methods requisite at all. The appropriate broad discussion of what it is to teach and learn is often missed in the specifics, and is certainly not approached at all in the latter setting. But there are commonalities and important ways of considering this profession comprehensively that I feel are lacking.

### **Separating the Trees from the Forest**

Certainly one may teach methods of education separate from a “content course.” But all methods involve the broad conditions implied by the context of the course and the content that will be added to fill in whatever “blanks” the methods course provides. There are also the distinctions that have been placed on academia from its classical roots, which indicate that studying science and art and math are separate activities and that learning these talents is best done by dividing up the knowledge into its component parts and then creating a structure for allowing systematic coverage of an entire field. While this is the guiding academic model within each domain, and while education is seen as one of these sections of knowing that should also be carved out—broken into outlines and scooped into a comprehensive curricula—I feel that this process itself is part of the artifice from which truly interdisciplinary, holistic, lifelong learning is trying to recover.

We, as educators, may say that we endorse varied teaching models. For instance, we can endorse student-centered instruction. This may be constructivist by nature and may put the teacher in the role of facilitator, rather than tweed-coated, font-of-knowledge. But so much of the culture of learning comes from seeing learning as “an event” that we structure, instead of as a way of living, that these shifting models for instruction might easily be seen as some type of highly complex shell game, where one shuffles the definitions, but actually very little changes from an old-world model of stand and recite: the teachers, are still the ones tricking the class into learning what they want them to know, while the students are not seen as participants so much as recipients.

### **Education as a Way of Life**

The philosophy that I share in this paper discusses reform that is two fold. The first distinction that I draw is in general perspective. Rather than seeing education in a formal, schoolhouse context, I feel that education should be viewed as, and encouraged as a naturally occurring phenomenon. To elaborate I will give an analogy. I have heard that the difference between a medical doctor’s and a midwife’s perspective on birth goes to the perspective of wellness. The illustration states that while a doctor looks at birth as a sickness to recover from, a midwife sees the activity as a natural activity to participate in. This wellness model might also be applied to teaching and learning. Education within

classes of education, within on-line learning environments, in public-school classrooms, in my sixth-grade son's mind, and untold other environments it is seen as a process to be endured and to finish. Educators encourage this with the semesters, and grades, and strict structures for reward and punishment. There are givers and getters in classes from kindergarten through many doctoral programs. The entire model hinges on the concept of latin/legal phrase of *loco parentis*, or "in place of the parent." In almost all classes there is a stated or implied understanding that the teacher knows more than the student, and that these two roles are different. Knowing will be applied by one on the other until the birth of knowing is achieved. If instead we were to not be the parents, or the doctors curing our patients of their ignorance, but were true participants in the ongoing experience of learning and knowing then school would be a different place. The model for ongoing participation in knowledge rather than conquering it seems a much more appropriate metaphor in this information age.

### **Embracing Diversity: Them and Us**

The second part of this that I will reference as reform—although that is an overstatement—goes to embracing the phenomenal diversity with which we all interact in our world, while still finding commonalities in the task of teaching. This may sound like such a broad statement that it possesses little meaning. But the point is that if one states that teachers face a diverse student population, it is as though teachers are a different type of human, and that students are also some other class of person on this planet. The idea is not that diversity is less profound or that it does not impact schools, but the language for addressing what happens in traditional schools should not, can not be separate from that used to address the population as a whole. The distinction is not merely semantic. There is not a separate population of this group of humans called students. We may put students in the small desks in the classroom of our minds, but this is not always a useful idiom. If one prepares to instruct, or to facilitate instruction it should be noted that those people called students are not a subset of humanity. As Pogo would say, they are us. The press regularly discusses how *student* test scores are changing. I contend that it is important that we see that it is not that students are doing worse (or better) but that we are doing so. The artificial mental and societal barrier between the student in society and the balance of the population implies much that is simply no longer true. One could say that death offers the only terminal degree. We all are learners.

We, as teachers, interact with all ages, perspectives, backgrounds, inclinations, learning abilities, subjects, and on and on. While it is highly contextual, and content and students may be radically diverse, programs that assist would-be instructors should at once acknowledge the profound diversity that exists in the learning process while still recognizing some areas of commonality that are often ignored. Are there any irreducible points to which we may look as a starting place? I believe that there are and that they are quite important. The point is not that this diversity makes studying education incomprehensible. It is not about throwing out proverbial babies with bathwater. It is not about changing the individual pieces of educational programs. Rather, I see this important acknowledgment as a fairly subtle change of perspective. As instructors try and become better at doing whatever it is they do, I believe there are a few touchstones that unite this

broad spectrum of instruction, from those who work with pre-K to those who teach knitting (or computing) at a retirement home.

## **Cognitive Capture and the Knowledge Moment**

The first commonality I have seen is the moment of what I will call cognitive capture. There is also the felt gratification or awareness that this experience may provide to both parties that I will call the knowledge moment. Now the conditions, and the resources, and the strategies one may employ in all the possible scenarios vary wildly. Yet, in each situation there are moments when those who are trying to understand/know/do something “get it.” For a comic it is the laugh. For the craftsman it is the finished product. For the teacher, it is the knowing. I could and have discussed assessment and the complexity of understanding and how one arrives at conclusions about comprehension and measurable objectives. But in my experience, as teachers do their work—across domains—it is the *immeasurable* objectives that are consistently the most important. If one’s class all aces some placement test, it is not so much the numeric data that truly moves the teacher, but the smiles on the faces. This emotional reinforcement is central and under emphasized. It is the indicator that the elusive thing that is “knowing,” crossed from the aether to the individual. Where they once could not install the carburetor, pass the exam, paint the portrait, do the spin; now they can. Although almost fully affective, I feel that this cannot be overestimated in terms of its importance. It seems to be interlaced with some biological imperative. Because it is difficult to quantify it is not adequately represented as a tangible goal. In a time that is obsessed with standardized test scores this fundamental key to learning is represented as fluff, when for many educators this provides the only reason that they remain in the trade. This knowledge moment is fundamental to teaching, and is not replaced by Skinnerian positive-reinforcement plans.

## **Holistic Advantage**

Another immeasurable objective that is also perhaps underrepresented in colleges of education is “holistic advantage.” I coin the phrase to refer to the qualitative difference in the student or teacher resultant of the learning process. I believe that they do not just possess more information. I feel with the knowing they are not the same. Some shift has occurred and one or the other is not better incrementally but wholly. It is not a measurable analogue, as though they are one IQ point higher, or that they have altered three brain cells. The student is a different person with each cognitive alteration. Moreover, as much as John Donne indicated that “every man is piece of the continent” as their loss is felt, so too do these tiny victories add to some inestimable whole of our school, region and world. I feel that we as species are different and improved with each additional knowledge moment. I also emphatically state that if this too is seen as emotional fluff then the point is wholly misunderstood. Because it cannot be measured, it is fashionable for it to be disregarded. The illustration of a drop in the ocean may be an overstatement. Maybe these individual and corporate moments are more like drops in a bathtub. The water goes up but the shape and the substance of the drop vanishes, and it is so subtle that measurement may fail. But over time the water will clearly rise.

## Who are the Teachers?

One of the goals of this discussion is to blur the distinctions between the profession of educating, and the ongoing process of sharing knowledge. The contrived distinctions on the side of the giver are mirrored on the side of the recipient. This implies that the role of student or learner may not meaningfully be parsed from that of the teacher, except as an idiomatic convention. This is not only to state that they are not binary complements of one another, but to claim that they are not even points of a continuum. The latter metaphor conjures the road of apprentice to journeyman. It is not revolutionary at all to state that that we remain students and we are at once the teacher as well. But at the same time, there is a conception in our minds of the chalkboard and the big desk at the front of the room, and a line between these two distinct roles. Studies done by Clifford Madsen at Florida State University and countless others demonstrate the strength of using students as tutors. His research reinforces the concept, which one might intuit, that students in relating to each other so authentically, also have the ability to share specific points of a curriculum with one another more efficiently and effectively than a their usual teacher. Students are teachers. Teachers are learners. When stated like this it sounds so obvious as to be obtuse. I believe that it is healthy in most all learning environments for the role of teacher to be humanized and especially in the highly structured environments that tend to lionize the teacher as infallible. We are all teachers. We are all learners. When we define ourselves as exclusively one or the other is it possible that it may do more harm than good?<sup>1</sup>

## Learning Environments for Success: Putting it Together

The final point that I will cover is what I consider to be the primary mandate and overarching property across most levels of instruction. To my mind, an important commonality of all instruction lies in creating “environments for success.” This language might be considered vague and thus not key to understanding. But for me this has become one of the primary planks for considering the role of teachers. There is a bad pun that I heard, “You can lead a girl to Vassar, but you can’t make her think.” which seems to beg the question of whether teachers can do more than merely present information that may be either accepted, rejected or ignored? Across domains, age barriers, and audiences the task given to the appointed instructor is that of finding ways to complement cognitive capture and holistic advantage. “Complement,” of course, implies providing something that completes. It is not a given that this will endorse any of the traditional modes of interaction. It is also vital to understand that it might be exactly the traditional modes of interaction. In either case, the idea is that the learner comes with more in hand than they will be given upon arrival (this in sharp contrast to Locke’s or Rousseau’s notions of *tabula rasa*). The task is to add to what already exists: holistic advantage; and to encourage moments and patterns of insight: cognitive capture. The context of this “complementary” action does not necessarily imply a single task, but a process. While in

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<sup>1</sup> While I feel that demystifying the role of teacher and discarding the presumption of infallibility from him or her is an important point in making us see ourselves as both teachers and students at once. I am conflicted insofar as I also feel that teaching is a worthy profession and that this may cause a profession that receives little honor and prestige to receive less still.

many cases there is and should be a finite beginning, middle and end prescribed, still the learning process is an ongoing activity and must be regarded as such. The path of the communication often will not be in the traditional mono-directional information dump of times past. Many successful environments will rightly employ use of those buzzwords of inquiry, discovery and educable moments as working dynamics that foster understanding. But as effective these are, they are just the foliage in this environment of success. The truly worthwhile learning environment is a place that allows growth, but should not be seen as a destination. It is not about the verbiage or labels for best practice this month. True best practice informs ongoing adoption of methods that are socially relevant, educationally significant, and individually appropriate for helping learners succeed.

## Reflection

As I recently watched my daughter work with her gymnastics coach I considered the similarities between that interaction and mine with my former grad students at Harvard. The interaction and challenges for these two learning circumstances were worlds apart. Yet I saw more sameness than difference in the larger interaction. My child came with her coordination and experience and relative willingness to learn and the environment that was provided either would complement her success or not. This included dozens of objectively measurable items, including the overall conditions, resources available, and strategies selected. My grad students also brought a raft of abilities and skills to meet the challenges that my field would require. My task was to provide and coordinate a series of activities and interactions to challenge their ambition, ability and need. I was charged with providing an environment for this seemingly homogenous group of over-achievers to help them individually approach “success.” Success may imply an abundance of outcomes, and responses, both affective and demonstrable. In the gymnastics class and in the graduate school situation this success is a remarkably personal collection of knowledge moments, some demonstrable and some only felt. For this paper’s use, success may be defined as an elaborate quilt of knowledge moments. The learning that occurred there was not all resultant of my energy and wisdom. But I believe that that important process did occur. The specific measurable items that my students and that institution demanded were, of course, defined and addressed. But the other part that is treated as an educational stepchild—the less tangible connections and mutual, holistic growth—also occurred. The part I played as teacher/learner should not be discounted, yet the idea that I was primary in why they enjoyed success is also not reasonable. I believe that we, as teachers, should provide as much influence as possible over the learning environment in which we are privileged to work, and we may even focus on the measurables. But at the end of the day, the term, the career, we will care about the immeasurables even more. One may give grades out at the end of the semester, but both the students and the teachers take away far more than that.

My daughter can now do a back handspring, and it gives her joy.