Teachers are Diverse, Too -- Respecting Each Other's Beliefs

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The title of Charles Dickens' book *Hard times for these times* captured the cruel imbalance between England's huge industrial wealth and the sad condition of her poor. Dickens' words came to mind when I thought about the imbalance between these enlightened educational times in which we celebrate student diversity and our often-inflexible attitude toward teachers.

Teacher diversity deserves to be respected both on humane grounds and for the sake of effective teaching. The diversity that is the concern of this essay is not that of ethnicity, gender, or age. It is the diversity of teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning, beliefs that guide the way we think about our teaching and the way we teach.

Our Belief Systems What are these beliefs? I have identified four belief systems (See the list below) about teaching roles, responsibilities, and relationships, each of which has long historical roots (Pratt, 1998; Tiberius, 2001). Teachers who assume the *Content Expert* Role serve as resources to their learners, as might a book or illustration. They see themselves as responsible for maintaining subject matter expertise rather than for skillful teaching, and the relationship with students is characterized by "division of labor". The teacher's job is to maintain expertise in the field while the students' job is learning.

Teachers who assume the *Skilled Performer Role* deliver information to mold their students. Their primary responsibility is using skilled

performances to make learning happen. Indeed, they often view themselves as the sole agents of learning and students as the "products" of their teaching.

Teachers who assume the *Interactive Role* interact with students for the purpose of facilitating learning. They believe that the skills of listening, understanding the student, and receiving feedback are just as important as are the skills of lecturing, explaining, and giving feedback. Finding out about the learner enables them to target interventions to students' specific learning needs.

Finally, teachers who assume the *Relational Role* help students by engaging them personally and using the relationship as a vehicle for learning.

Beliefs about Teacher Roles, from 1945 to 2000
• *The Content Expert Role:* experts who serve as a resource, like a book or a picture, by maintaining expertise in the subject matter.
• *The Skilled Performance Role*: teachers who make learning happen by transmitting information or shaping students.
• *The Interactive Role:* teachers who facilitate learning by interacting with the learner.
• *The Relational Role:* teachers who use the relationship and personal engagement for the purpose of helping the learner.

Respecting Beliefs
I will illustrate my argument about respecting teachers' beliefs using the role of *Skilled Performer*, the most commonly held role in higher education today. This role is epitomized by a successful lecturer whom I shall call Dr. Stage. Students raved about his excellent organization, clear communication, humor, and anecdotes. However, his success depended as much on the context in which he lectured as it did on his performance. His lectures were valuable not only because they supplied information, one of the essential ingredients of student learning, but also because that information was not supplied by another component of the teaching system. Moreover, other essential ingredients for learning—such as motivation and feedback—which were not supplied by Dr. Stage, were supplied by other aspects of the system. The exams were based on his lectures,

not on the textbook material; and a tutorial system provided corrective feedback.

After a decade of successful teaching Dr. Stage's course became a casualty of curriculum reform. He was offered a teaching assignment as facilitator of a small group session. He endured the training sessions and tried in vain to become a small group discussion leader. Students were highly critical of him on their written evaluations. His contribution was not valued in the tutorial situation because the arrangement did not require either his lecturing skills or his information. In fact it strictly forbade it. Students were supposed to look up the information themselves. The curriculum reformers and administrators interpreted the problem as teacher inflexibility. He was a dinosaur. Years ago we made the same interpretations of students who either fit into the system or had no business being here. Today student "inflexibilities" are called learning styles, and we spend a great deal of energy accommodating them.

Those who consigned Dr. Stage to the dustbin failed to appreciate that beliefs about teaching are often part of an enduring and profound perspective. Changing such perspectives requires a transformation of the very framework that organizes the teacher's understanding, a change that is difficult, emotionally draining, and therefore one that requires a great deal of support (Mezirow, 1991; Pratt, 1998; Robertson 1996, 1999). In the long run a perspective transformation would provide Dr. Stage with a broader repertoire of teaching roles and thus more flexibility to teach under various conditions, but in the short run we should respect Dr. Stage's beliefs and limitations just as we respect diversity in our students.

We could do this by arranging the teaching-learning system to complement Stage's contribution, not necessarily by reinstating his previous lecture course, which was discontinued because it fostered passive learning, but by designing a new arrangement under which Dr. Stage could maintain his role of information transmitter within an active learning curriculum. For example, as a member of a panel discussion he could function as a resource, answering questions and debating with other specialists. The coordinator of the panel discussion could provide all of the teacher functions that require interaction, leaving Dr. Stage to fill in the missing pieces supplying

expert information. The coordinator could interact with the students to create a motivating climate, for example by discussing with students the importance of the material to them, the qualifications of the panel discussants, and mentioning the fact that the exam will contain questions about the panel discussion. The coordinator could also encourage an appropriate relationship between the students and the panel discussants by the appropriate introductions.

Another format that might allow Dr. Stage to deliver information is a brief lecture followed by a break and then a Q & A session. At the break students could write questions on cards and hand them in. After the break, or at the next session, Dr. Stage could answer them, again in his enthusiastic lecturing style. Still another format that would complement Dr. Stage's beliefs about teaching and his talent might be an "information" tutorial in which he answers questions in his specialty, questions that were developed previously by leaderless student "study groups." In all of these suggestions the intention is to arrange the elements of the teaching-learning system so that Dr. Stage's contribution is a necessary ingredient to learning. (For a discussion about matching teacher competencies with teaching tasks see Bess, 2000.)

When education was teacher-centered, teachers just lectured and learners were left to arrange for the rest of their learning needs. By shifting focus to the learner we discovered individual differences, identified the specific needs of the learner, and developed systems exquisitely sensitive to learners. However, the systems we developed often forced teachers to become educational gumball machines who were expected to deliver whatever the system required. We can do better. Heavily influenced by constructivism, and by recent research on the social and emotional components of learning (Love & Love, 1995), modern educators tend to view learning as a process of enculturation into a community of practice by means of social interaction among learners and between learners and teachers.

Conclusion We are now in a position to design systems that are centered on the relationship between teachers and students, on teaching and learning as a social system. To do this we must begin to respect the diversity of teachers who are legitimate members of the system "their beliefs, competencies and limitations" just as we have

learned to respect student diversity.

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