Teaching: Beliefs and Behaviors

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What do professors believe about students, teachers, and the instructional process? When these beliefs become conscious and explicit, does teaching change? If teaching behaviors change as a consequence of articulating beliefs, do beliefs change as a consequence of analyzing behaviors?

For many faculty, inquiring into these matters is quite exciting. We find that making beliefs explicit is more difficult than it seems at first, and analyzing teaching behaviors turns out to be both intellectually and emotionally challenging. In this essay, I suggest one approach to inquiring into beliefs about teaching and into the relationships between those beliefs and teaching behaviors.

The approach has four steps:
• Articulate a belief about teaching.
• Identify a problematic teaching situation.
• Report the behavior taken to resolve the problem.
• Find a rationale that links the belief and the behavior.

A Thought Experiment
Before reading further, I invite you to conduct the following thought experiment. First, make your belief about teaching explicit by completing this sentence: "Teaching is. . . ." Second, think of a recent problem or dilemma in your teaching. (The example I use below is a situation when students fail to participate in class discussion, but you might select a more personally meaningful example.) Third, describe

what you did to resolve the problem. Fourth, look for a rationale that links the belief with the behavior.

Figure 1
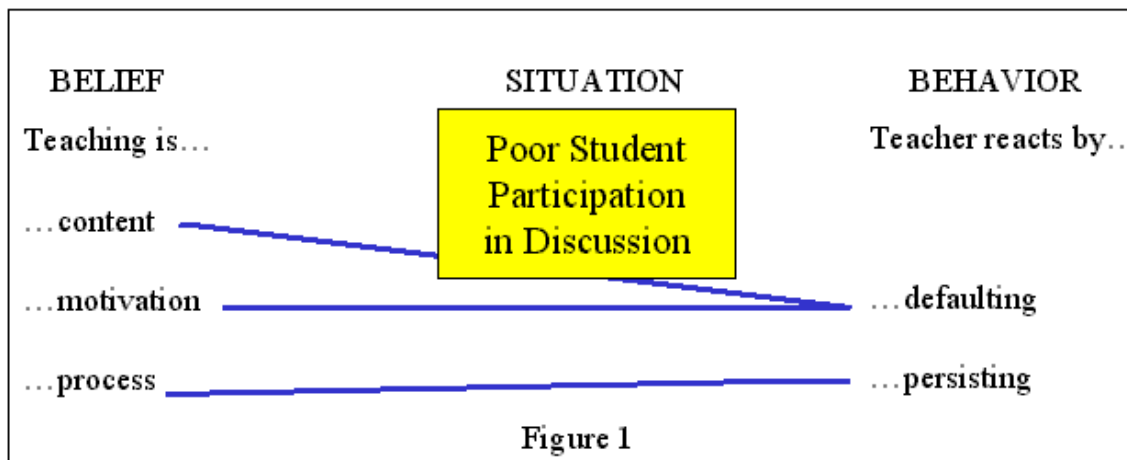
As context for interpreting your experiment, consider this example of beliefs, behaviors, and relationships between them. Suppose one believes that what is central to teaching is mastery of course content. That person's teaching is likely to differ, I hypothesize, from one who believes that how students think about course content is central to teaching. For one thing, I expect that the former is likely to be less patient with a faltering class discussion than the latter teacher would be.

What Interviews Tell Us My hypothesis grows out of interviews we conducted with teaching assistants in several humanities and social science departments(Menges and Rando, 1989). We asked these TAs to tell us what they meant by "teaching." We also asked them to recall a situation in which their students did not participate in class discussion to the extent expected. For about one third of the TAs, beliefs were oriented toward mastery of course content. Most of them said that when discussion lagged they either switched to a nondiscussion activity or dismissed the class. We called that the "default" strategy.

By contrast, most of the TAs whose beliefs were oriented to how students process information (about one third) said that they continued to search for ways to start a discussion. This strategy we called "persistence."

A final third of the TAs held beliefs that were oriented toward motivation, emphasizing student interest and engagement. Most of them reported the default strategy.

These relationships, as shown in Figure 1, are intuitively plausible. Discussion by reluctant or unprepared students does not favor the goals of content-oriented instructors, and we can understand if they decide to default to a lecture or even dismiss class. For process-oriented instructors, on the other hand, discussion is less a means of transmitting information than it is a way of transforming information. Discussion encourages and demonstrates active processing, so persisting in trying to promote discussion is quite compatible with the instructor's goals. Motivation-oriented instructors fear that an unsuccessful discussion will make students dissatisfied, and that they will consequently become even less interested and engaged. Those instructors may reasonably decide to default rather than to risk lowered motivation, the negative consequences of persistence. Now return to your own thought experiment. What belief did you record? What behavior in the face of a problem did you report? Are they consistent with the patterns found in the TA interviews?

Surely It's More Complex Than That We do not know whether these findings from a small number of teaching assistants generalize to experienced professors and to teachers in other disciplines, but the scheme presented in Figure 1 probably oversimplifies a very common situation. To be comprehensive, a model of beliefs and behaviours should include additional variables. We might include a larger number of beliefs or focus on beliefs that have a more specific referent than "teaching." We might examine the intensity of each belief. We might ask about the costs and benefits of each belief, that is, about the perceived consequences of acting on the belief. Further, information about teaching behaviors should include direct observation rather than be based only on self-reports. A researcher could place all of these variables into an equation for predicting behaviors and beliefs (c.f., Fishbein & Ijzen, 1975).

Not only do beliefs influence the likelihood of particular behaviors. They also influence our perceptions, acting as filters that can distort otherwise objective data. For instance, some professors behave as if they believe that nearly all of their students are potential majors in

that department. These professors teach as though all students in introductory courses were beginning an intensive study of that discipline, when in fact the teacher knows that only two or three will enroll in advanced courses. Here behavior is consistent with belief, but the belief itself is indefensible.

There are also pragmatic reasons for articulating beliefs and comparing them with behavior. I am thinking of situations where beliefs that remain implicit lead to confusion and miscommunication, problems that might be avoided were beliefs made explicit. Consider a curriculum committee meeting that dissolves into argument. It may well be that lying at the core of the disagreement are divergent beliefs about what should be learned and about how learning occurs. Committee deliberations might be improved by taking time to survey members' beliefs. An inventory of teaching goals (e.g., Cross & Angelo, 1990) can be useful for this purpose.

Bringing Beliefs to the Surface for Discussion Discussing beliefs and behaviors in groups is a more stimulating way to examine beliefs and behaviors than individual thought experiments, particularly when an atmosphere of trust permits participants to disagree and to challenge one another.Christensen's (1981) collection of teaching cases includes one about a class where participation declined, prompting the professor to become angry and walk out. When faculty groups discuss that case, they usually reveal a variety of attributions (beliefs) about where responsibility for the situation lies. Some emphasize the students' responsibilities, saying that students were apathetic. Others place responsibility with the teacher, saying that students were bored by the authoritarian teacher. When participants are challenged to clarify the basis for their beliefs, it sometimes becomes evident that beliefs rest on incomplete data or faulty inferences. As they subsequently think about their own teaching, group members sometimes decide to gather more systematic information with videotape or by inviting a colleague to visit a class meeting.

Successful group discussions about beliefs and behaviors should meet four requirements:

• Beliefs about teaching and learning should be expressed as

specifically as possible.
- The basis for the beliefs, whether empirical or intuitive, should be made explicit.
- Participants should try to agree on instructional behaviors that are implied by the beliefs.
- Data about classroom behavior should be available, perhaps from recordings or student questionnaires.

Group members then discuss the adequacy, appropriateness, and consistency of this information, paying particular attention to potential contradictions between beliefs and behaviors. For some faculty it may become apparent that beliefs are based less on rational analyses than on intuitive or emotional processes. For others, beliefs rest on stereotypes that cannot be convincingly supported.

Of course, behavioral change does not necessarily follow from awareness that beliefs and behaviors are contradictory. Sometimes we simply continue to live with the inconsistency. In part this is due to our natural resistance to change, as Smith (1983; 1990) discusses in connection with workshops where faculty compare their espoused theories (beliefs) with their theories-in-use (behaviors). Resistance to changing behaviors is also due in part to skill deficits. If change requires developing new skills or refining old ones, teachers may need to invest time in microteaching, roleplaying, and other techniques that provide feedback about the effects of their behaviors.

Thought experiments and group discussions are only the beginnings of what is likely to be rewarding exploration, but they are necessary beginnings. The exploration is rewarding because teaching and learning offer problems no less challenging than the problems we encounter in our disciplines.

References

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