**Theory 1: Teaching as telling or transmission**

Many university teachers implicitly or explicitly define the task of teaching undergraduates as the transmission of authoritative content or the demonstration of procedures. The knowledge to be handed on to students at this level (in contrast to the knowledge constituted in research and scholarship at higher levels) is seen as unproblematic. Subject content exists sui generis. It must be instilled in students. Much of the folklore of university teaching follows a similar line; even the iconic Robbins Report defined key functions of higher education in terms of transmission of culture and instruction in skills. The traditional didactic lecture represents a perspective on teaching taken from the point of view of the teacher as the source of undistorted information. The mass of students are passive recipients of the wisdom of a single speaker. There are more modern versions of this theory too, represented in the idea of ‘delivery’ of courses and the belief that fundamental problems in the quality of university education can be solved by transferring knowledge more efficiently, typically using some form of information technology.

This way of looking at teaching has been identified in several studies of schoolteachers in training (see, for example, Russell and Johnson 1988). It focuses on what the teacher does to students. The lecturer’s role is seen as communicating knowledge smoothly; it is both necessary and sufficient that he or she should be an expert in the subject matter.

Knowledge about subject content and knowledge of the techniques for teaching it are kept in separate compartments. The theory shows some affinities with the superficial engagement with content that typifies a surface approach. Learning, it seems to be saying, will occur as long as a quantity of information gets across to students.

Consistent with this view of how learning occurs, lecturers who use this theory of teaching will typically attribute any failure to learn to faults in the student (Biggs (1999) calls this the ‘blame-the-student’ theory of teaching). These lecturers conceptualise the relationship between what the teacher does and what the student learns as a non-problematic one, a sort of input-output model with the works hidden away. If no student learning after exposure to teaching takes place, their theory cannot really explain why it does not. Occasionally I hear of lecturers, on being presented with evidence of student ignorance on a topic that has been the subject of a previous series of lectures, saying to the students (with astonishment) ‘But you did go to the lectures last term, didn’t you?’

We are also reminded of the lecturers in Chapter 3 who appeared to believe in the existence of ‘good learners’ and ‘poor learners’—who thought that the quality of student learning was categorically determined by ability and personality, and could not be changed by teaching (see Bloom (1976) for convincing arguments against this belief). Laziness, unwillingness to work at a particular topic, inability to absorb new material—the metaphor is significant—and poor preparation at an earlier stage of education are among the reasons adduced. This theory implies that all problems in teaching and learning reside outside the lecturer, the programme of study, or even the university. It is at heart an additive and quantitative way of conceptualising teaching and learning.

**Theory 2: Teaching as organising student activity**

In theory 2, the focus moves away from the teacher towards the student. Lecturers see teaching as a supervision process involving the articulation of techniques designed to ensure that students learn. Authoritative subject knowledge, so salient in the first theory, recedes into the background.

Student learning is now seen as a perplexing problem. How can ideals (developing independence and critical thinking, teaching in a way that is more exciting than the teaching that oneself experienced, etc.) be translated into reality? Activity in students is regarded as the panacea. It is assumed that there is a finite set of rules which may be infallibly applied to enabling them to understand; they imply that students will learn through reacting and doing. The methods may include ways of motivating students so that they are in the right psychological frame of mind to learn dull subject matter; simple ‘rewards and punishments’ approaches to assessment (‘If you don’t learn this, you’ll fail the exam; if you do, it will be useful next year’); techniques for promoting discussion in class; and processes which require students to link their theoretical knowledge to their experience, such as forms of experiential learning.

This theory represents in many ways a transitional stage between theories 1 and 3. Ms Lane (Chapter 6) is probably working from this theory. Teaching is seen no longer as being mainly about telling or transmission: it is also about dealing with students, and above all about making them busy, using a set of efficient procedures to cover the ground. This theory is the level at which many attempts to innovate in higher education are presented and at which much staff development takes place. University teachers often complain that they lack the skills to help students become more able; but they often want at the same time a set of methods that are fail-safe: tested, tried and true for all terrains. Improving teaching from this point of view is about extending a lecturer’s repertoire of techniques rather than about changing his or her understanding. Learning teaching techniques is, in this theory, a sufficient basis for improving teaching. If we learn how to do something, it is assumed that learning how to reflect on what we do and to apply our knowledge to new situations naturally follows.

The view of student learning corresponding with this theory of teaching is that there are certain conditions that will guarantee learning. Student learning it is no longer seen as solely the learner’s responsibility. If learning does not occur, something is wrong outside the learner as well as inside. Therefore, we should get students to do things. Theory 2 underlies the notion of ‘active learning’ that remains one of the central ideas of much staff development in higher education.

**Theory 3: Teaching as making learning possible**

If theories 1 and 2 focus respectively on the teacher and the student, theory 3 looks at teaching and learning as two sides of the same coin. Theory 3 is a more complex view. In this conception, teaching, students and the subject content to be learned are linked together by an overarching framework or system. Teaching is comprehended as a process of working cooperatively with learners to help them change their understanding. It is making student learning possible. Teaching involves finding out about students’ misunderstandings, intervening to change them and creating a context of learning that encourages students to engage with the subject matter. Note that this theory is very much concerned with the content of what students have to learn in relation to how it should be taught. As we saw in the previous chapter, a teacher who uses this theory will recognise and focus especially on the essential issues that seem to represent critical barriers to student learning. The content to be taught, and students’ problems with learning it, direct the methods he or she uses. The method is secondary to the problem.

The teacher’s conception of his or her role differs radically in this theory. This is because it draws on a different epistemology from theories 1 and 2. The teacher recognises that knowledge of the content is constituted by the learner, and that this process of constituting reality is not qualitatively different whether the learning is of accepted fact and theory in a first year course or whether it takes place at the frontiers of knowledge in the same subject. The nature of obtaining knowledge does not differ. Learning is applying and modifying one’s own ideas; it is something the student does, rather than something that it done to the student. ‘Transmission’ of existing knowledge is at best a half-true description of education; all information is new and requires to be decoded if you have not met it before; all facts must be interpreted imaginatively. This is no doubt what Whitehead had in mind when he spoke of ‘imaginatively imparting information’ in university teaching:

A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence. This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energising as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes. Imagination…enables men to construct an intellectual vision of a new world, and it preserves the zest of life by the suggestion of satisfying purposes.

(Whitehead 1929:139)

Jerome Bruner makes a related point that neatly expresses the central idea of this theory:

A curriculum reflects not only the nature of knowledge itself but also the nature of the knower and of the knowledge-getting process… A body of knowledge, enshrined in a university faculty and embodied in a series of authoritative volumes, is the result of much prior intellectual activity. To instruct someone in these disciplines is not a matter of getting him to commit results to mind. Rather, it is to teach him to participate in the process that makes possible the establishment of knowledge. We teach a subject not to produce little living libraries on that subject, but rather to get a student to think mathematically for himself, to consider matters as an historian does, to take part in the process of knowledge-getting. Knowing is a process, not a product.

(Bruner 1966:72)

We are a long way away from surface approaches in these views of education and this theory of teaching.

Improving teaching is an integral part of theory 3, precisely because it expresses a notion of teaching as a speculative and reflective activity. Using theory 3 means listening to students and listening to other teachers in an effort to teach better. Continuous improvement of skills through constructing increasingly elaborate professional knowledge becomes part of teaching from this perspective; the teacher understands the need to identify critical obstacles to student learning for different topics and give them special attention in the curriculum. This implies a certain attitude to educational principles and research: while theories 1 and 2 typically regard these as separate from the ‘real’ world of classrooms and teaching strategies, theory 3 recognises a complementarity between teaching and research on how to help students learn. Teachers working from this perspective are interested in learning from a variety of sources, including research evidence, about how they might improve their teaching (see Marton and Ramsden 1988).

The lecturer using this theory will realise that he or she must include a variety of methods to help students learn, so that individual differences between learners can be fitted into the general goal of helping all students to change their understanding. The corresponding view of student learning is clear: there are certain favourable conditions for learning which, however, need to be reinterpreted to fit specific students and subject matter. The activities of teaching, in other words, are seen as context-related, uncertain, and continuously improvable. Unlike theory 2, this view of teaching does not accept that there can be a protocol to ensure that learning happens