The Difference Between Traditional and Facilitative Instruction

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One of the more interesting approaches to providing a definition and description of the role of the teacher as a traditional lecturer as opposed to a facilitator is to elucidate these characteristics in the words of a debate held between proponents and critics of these roles.

In a polemic dismissing *facilitation* as "the latest in a litany of educational slogans," Stewart (1993) proposes that facilitation is an "activity" subordinate to and assistive of teaching in its traditional method. Acts of teaching are divided into two classes, according to Stewart. The first class are the *intellectual* acts of teaching, which encompass "explaining, defining, justifying, demonstrating, comparing, questioning, probing, inferring, concluding, interpreting, illustrating, and proving." The other class is the *strategic* acts of teaching and includes "motivating, planning, encouraging, guiding, counseling, and disciplining." He contends facilitation of learning falls with the class of strategic acts, secondary to and not essential to the primary function of teaching which are its intellectual acts. As part of his argument against facilitation, he notes that one dictionary defines it as "mak[ing] something less difficult or easier to achieve." This means that facilitation as a method of teaching is not actually required and that without it, the process of teaching might be more difficult but that the process stands on its own and does not imply that learning will not necessarily be accomplished.

Teaching is traditionally seen as lecturing, or as Stewart describes it, "telling" children what they must learn and know to achieve the objectives of the program. It is an essential activity in the learning process:

> Telling is of course an important logical act of teaching. To tell children basic facts in mathematics, science, language, history, geography, or morals is virtually inescapable, and it is an efficient means of helping them learn at lower levels what is necessary for learning at more advanced levels of schooling. Yet "telling" is but one of many activities of teaching and cannot begin to capture the richness of the concept. Reduction of teaching to a single, linear act is evidence of conceptual muddle (p. 8).

Stewart criticizes the ideal promulgated by an authority responsible for childhood education, which is that "we facilitate learning, we don't teach." In his view, the traditional style of "teaching is not at odds with developing the students' individual autonomy," which he views as the goal of facilitative instruction.

In response to Stewart's dismissal of facilitation, Case et al. (1994) claim that Stewart has misconstrued what facilitation is. They argue first and foremost that facilitation focuses on what learning is rather than what teaching is. They assert that the learner must *intend* to learn or rather be in a state of mind prepared for learning, and that the teacher's first duty is to achieve that goal prior to any attempt to deliver course content. Students must just not memorize or assimilate knowledge without it truly having meaning for them. Even exercises or practice problems that reinforce by example the theoretical concepts presented to them will be less meaningful compared to an activity in which the facilitator gets the students to think about situations in which the theory applies to personal experience and to get the student to solve problems related those experiences. Their thesis is that the shift toward the teacher-as-facilitator "stems in part from the recognition that students' mental activity, not teachers' 'intellectual acts,' is the *sine qua non* of learning."

Case et al. also take issue with the manner in which Stewart circumscribes what facilitation of learning actually is.

> Crudely put, teaching acts are facilitative when the primary intention is to empower or support students so that students may learn something; teaching acts are transmissive when the primary intention is to effect the desired learning directly, with minimal student mediation (p. 295).

The teacher's explanation of a concept may have the aim of helping students to learn to think for themselves, and this too can be seen as facilitating.

The argument for facilitation is that the teacher is not the sole source of the content (Grant, 2003) Indeed, the teacher should not be merely the promulgator of a set of "prepackaged knowledge" of facts which may be a set of beliefs or which are said to be controversial or put forth a political agenda, and which are presented without a meaningful context or as unquestioning. Teachers "must…see themselves as guides to critical student inquiry and not as providers of answers" (Case et al., 1994).

An important point to consider is the particular learning environment in which didactic (or traditional) as opposed to facilitative teaching might be the more preferred teaching method. The debate between Stewart and Case et al. above was about teaching children. Stewart argued that young children in particular could not be amenable to facilitative learning methods because it essentially required an existing base of theoretical and practical knowledge. He did not address the greater possibility that the facilitative teaching model would be preferable in the case of adult learning, since adults come with both a considerable base of knowledge and set of experiences. There is evidence that young adults in college taking introductory coursework are more motivated to pursue the discipline (advanced coursework) when the professor acts as a "facilitator-person" instead of the "expert-authoritarian" (McKeachie *et al.*, 1978).

With good reason the approach of this exposition on the difference between traditional and facilitative instruction was given as a debate between its proponents and critics. Each of the opposing groups attempted to define each other−and badly, in the opinions of each other−and then attempt to defend their positions through their criticism of the other. The alternative to presenting the differences between these teaching methods might have been to resort to a traditional type of essay in which definitions and examples of lecturing-as-teaching and facilitating-as-teaching are presented. The alternative seemed less facilitative.

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