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Teaching Approaches: Theory and Practice

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While according to some authors, *teaching approach* is the way of teaching students, implying the kinds of teaching and learning activities that a teacher conducts and the ways in which teacher engages students with the subject matter, other authors use this term to refer to the way of teaching, which can take the form of a lecture, tutorial, or laboratory work. The paper first focuses in particular on the theoretical understandings of teacher-centered and student-centered approaches, executive, facilitator, and liberationist teaching approaches, as well as lecture, direct instruction, and group discussion. These theories are then examined in regard to teaching approaches in Kazakhstan, whose educational system has recently undergone significant changes, moving from traditional to a more competence-based type of education, thereby encouraging students to develop the ability to apply the knowledge and experience in order to solve problems. By examining these theories and their application in Kazakhstan, it is hoped to shed light on the areas for further growth and improvement.
Keywords: teaching approaches, approaches to teaching, mainstream schools

Introduction

The following paper discusses the concept as well as the main types of teaching approaches. The purpose of the paper is to show the international perspective of teaching approaches, and also to describe the current situation with teaching approaches in Kazakhstan. First, it presents the existing definitions for the concept of *teaching approach*. Then, I elaborate on the range of types of teaching approaches suggested by international research. The variety of approaches is supported by practical examples of how these approaches can be applied in real life teaching environment.

The paper also considers the perspective on teaching approaches within Kazakhstani context. Here I discuss the range of teaching approaches applied in Kazakhstani mainstream schools and outline the challenges that teachers and students face in the process of schooling. Finally, I provide my recommendations for the improvement of the teaching process and describe the qualities that an effective teacher should possess.

Definition of Teaching Approach

There are various definitions of *teaching approach* (see Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2004; Richardson, 2005; Stes & Van Petegem, 2012; Struyven, Dochy & Janssens, 2010; Yeung, Craven & Kaur, 2014). Fenstermacher and Soltis (2004) in their book *Approaches to Teaching* define *teaching approach* as the way of teaching students, which implies all sorts of teaching and learning activities that a teacher conducts and the ways in which teacher engages students with the subject matter in order to introduce new facts to students, tailor the new material to what students have already acquired, facilitate interaction and build enthusiasm.

According to Doumas (2012), *teaching approach* refers to the mode or manner of teaching, which can be shaped as a lecture, tutorial, or laboratory work. Banning (2005) adds that the approach to teaching can include the understanding of how people learn that is usually embraced by a learning theory. Moreover, as Hwang and Embi (2007) argue, teaching approach involves the understanding of how to facilitate learning; for example, if the teacher possesses the qualities such as passion, ability to provide timely and constructive feedback, it can help to motivate the learner. The important thing to realize here is that the way teachers picture their role and what goals they want to pursue as teachers can have an immense influence on how their teaching is structured (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2004).

In the following discussion, I will employ the definition of teaching approach suggested by Braund, Bennett, Hampden-Thompson and Main (2013), who state that "*teaching approach* refers to the main emphasis placed by a teacher in facilitating student learning of content" (p. 3). This interpretation clearly denotes the nature of the notion of teaching approach but at the same time is general enough to encompass both the teachers' attitudes toward teaching and the specific activities and techniques they use.

Types of Teaching Approaches

The variety of types of teaching approaches remarkably reflects the number of authors who have written on the subject (Braund et al., 2013; Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2004; Prosser & Trigwell, 1993; Trigwell, Prosser & Taylor 1994; Woolfolk, 2014). Different authors approach the topic from different perspectives, which leads to the array of approaches continuing to grow. However, it would be virtually impossible to list all the approaches in one work. Therefore, only a few of the most common are discussed below. The first two sections examine

the teacher values and attitudes towards teaching and the roles that they assume in the classroom. The following three sections highlight commonly used specific techniques which reflect some of these values.

Teacher-centered and student-centered approaches

The most important contribution to the research on teaching approaches was made by Prosser and Trigwell (1993; 1999), who in 1993 introduced the Approaches to Teaching Inventory (ATI), which they used to evaluate teaching approaches on a general scale. The ATI put teachers' approaches into two categories: a conceptual change/student-focused approach (CCSF) and an information transmission/teacher-focused approach (ITTF). While the first approach puts the focus on the student and aims to change students' ways of perceiving knowledge, in the second approach (ITTF), the teacher acts as a transmitter of knowledge and is viewed as a central figure in the process of teaching. According to Prosser and Trigwell (1999), there is a correlation between teachers' apprehension of teaching and their teaching methods, which implies that if teachers need to alter their teaching approaches, they will inevitably have to change their assumption of the process of teaching.

This two-way model of teaching approaches has been supported by many other researchers (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Lindblom-Ylanne, Trigwell, Nevgi & Ashwin, 2006; Nevgi, Postareff & Lindblom-Ylanne, 2004) who acknowledged that these teaching approaches can exist in different environments. The studies by Trigwell, Prosser, and Waterhouse (1999) have proven that a student-focused approach is more effective since it helps students to employ a deeper learning approach, while, in contrast, an approach where the teacher is the core figure facilitates a shallower approach to learning. This means that in comparison with a teacher-focused approach to teaching, a student-focused approach results in students adopting more effective methods of learning. Furthermore, Prosser and Trigwell (1999) conclude that if teachers utilize a student-focused approach in their teaching, they have a clearer concept of how to teach their subject. Meanwhile, when a teacher employs a teacher-focused approach, it limits his or her way of teaching. This model of understanding teaching approaches will be helpful in examining specific instructional techniques, as well as their use in any given context.

Executive, facilitator and liberationist approaches to teaching

In their 2004 book, Fenstermacher and Soltis distinguish and explore three approaches to teaching. They have named them *the executive, the facilitator,* and *the liberationist* approaches, although the authors state that such approaches can go by many names. These distinctions are helpful because they allow us to more carefully and accurately describe and evaluate the wide range of approaches teachers employ.

As an illustration of this approach, the authors take Jim Barnes as an example of a teacher who has taught a number of lower grades in the Bryant Elementary School in the US over the past twelve years. Jim views his teaching as the way to supply his students with both a set of basic skills that children can apply in their lives and an understanding of a specific subject that will help them to progress through their schooling. He prefers to use curriculum materials, which are highly organized and systematic, and allow the children to follow them easily. Any new material is based on the last one and is always followed by the next (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2004).

The second approach, the *facilitator*, focuses on with what students come to the classroom. This approach stresses the usage of students' background. The teacher-facilitator is generally described as a compassionate person that understands how important it is to help students "grow personally and reach a high level of self-actualization and self-understanding" (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2004, p. 5).

Fenstermacher and Soltis (2004) describe the example of Nancy Kwong, a successful teacher-facilitator. Nancy teaches English to middle school students. She thinks that the main purpose of education is to provide youngsters with some perspective on themselves, to help them understand who and what they are, and who and what they might become. She teaches literature as if it was written for her students and was intertwined with their life experiences. She uses journal writing as an activity that provides students with an opportunity to express their feelings and personal perspectives, thus, helping them grow and develop, as well as encouraging their ability to communicate and write effectively.

The final approach, the *liberationist*, characterizes the teacher as the one who helps the learner to free and open his or her mind and supports him or her in turning into a "well-rounded, knowledgeable, and moral human being" (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2004, p. 6).

The authors present the illustration of a teacher, Roberto Umbras, who actively employs the aforementioned approach. He teaches history and social studies in an urban high school which has quite a

history of racial and ethnic tension. Nevertheless, Roberto understands and respects cultural diversity of the school and tries to persuade his students do the same. With regard to his subject, Roberto is trying to get his students to think as historians and to "understand the way we try to make sense of the past" (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2004, p. 3). The conceptualization and explanation presented by Fenstermacher and Soltis offers a clear understanding of these teaching approaches due to their appropriate support with example scenarios.

All the approaches listed above view teaching in its general sense, which means that we approach the teaching as a whole. On the other hand, if we talk about more specific models of the material delivery or the techniques that can be applied in order to enhance the outcome of teaching, several approaches can be mentioned. By examining these techniques using the above models, it is possible to draw more valuable conclusions about the changing nature of teaching overall.

Lecture

Perhaps the most archetypal example of teacher-centered teaching is the lecture format. According to Banning (2005), the lecture is the teaching technique which is used most frequently in spite of all the amount of criticism it has faced. As Banning mentions, a lecture can be described as a way to transmit knowledge to learners. However, such approach may not lead to effective learning due to the fact that lecture is essentially a teacher-centered approach (Entwistle, 1997). On the other hand, Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall (2003) insist that the lecture is still widely used as a dominant method of teaching, and is generally considered effective owing to the fact that it can help to build a solid base of knowledge, although it should be completed with other progressive teaching approaches due to lack of student participation.

Direct instruction

After a number of studies in the 1970s and 1980s, new models of teaching were discovered that helped to improve student learning (Woolfolk, 2014). One of them received the name *direct instruction* or *explicit teaching,* while Tom Good calls it *active teaching approach* (as cited in Woolfolk, 2014). More specifically, *direct instruction* refers to the systematic way teachers pay attention to how they give instructions, provide explanations, and check student understanding (Rosenshine, 2008). However, the variety of definitions for direct instruction makes it difficult to identify the real concept of the term. Through their review of several studies, Rosenshine and Stevens (1986) provide the most helpful definition, concluding that teachers employed certain strategies while teaching subjects with a clear structure, such as arithmetic or IT. The strategies could be summarized as the following:

1. Lessons should begin by reviewing of previously acquired material, followed by stating the main aims of the given lesson;
2. The process of presenting the new material should be gradual, providing students with enough time to practice each new piece of information;
3. The instructions and explanations should be accurate and comprehensive;
4. Teacher should give all students enough practice with new material;
5. Students' understanding should be checked with the help of questions throughout the learning process;
6. Students should be provided with constant feedback.

Woolfolk (2014) asserts that direct instruction remains a useful approach for building the most essential skills in students. These skills can be best applied to the tasks that are moderate in difficulty and can be taught step by step and easily assessed by standardized tests.

On the other hand, some researchers imply that what matters while giving the instructions is what kind of student receives the knowledge. Janicki (1979) found that if students possessed an *internal locus of control*, that is being able to take responsibility for the consequences of their own behavior, they could study less successfully in a direct instructional approach than in a small-group approach. Such students were more successful when they could work on math problems in small groups and were able to choose from a range of group activities. However, if students had an *external* locus of control, they performed more poorly in small-groups and had better results in a direct approach in which they were taught in a large group and then worked independently on seatwork.

As can be seen, the effectiveness of direct instruction is closely related to how much control students can exercise. The direct instruction approach does not give much control to a student as all the activities are

closely monitored by the teacher (Peterson, 1979). Overall, it can be concluded that direct instruction would benefit more the students with the locus of control that is appropriate for the type of teaching being exercised.

Group discussion

In many writings about teaching approaches *discussion* is generally associated with a large variety of teaching techniques that are based on interaction. More specifically, *discussion* refers to a group activity where the teacher and the students either analyze a problem or share their experiences and views with each other (Ewens, 1989). In a group discussion, a teacher usually poses a question, then listens to students' answers, and responds to them. However, as Woolfolk (2014) argues, in a real group dialogue "the teacher does not have a dominant role" (p. 582). Students should ask and answer to each other's questions, and react to each other responses without teacher's help.

Group discussions can be very effective. They are especially useful when it is necessary to give all students the chance to participate. With the help of group discussions, students can learn to express themselves and justify their views, and also, to respect the opinions of others (Woolfolk, 2014). Nevertheless, even though the discussion method can be quite useful, many teachers are not willing to employ it (Gall & Gillett, 1980). The reluctance arises from the fact that group discussions possess a high degree of risk and unpredictability. Some students may be unwilling to engage in discussion due to their feeling of anxiety. Often, only a limited number of students lead the discussion, while the others remain passive (Woolfolk, 2014).

In general, many researchers highlight the importance of group discussion because unlike lecture, the discussion method can ignite critical thinking skills in students. It is also supported by the research that knowledge gained during discussions stays longer in students' memory that after a lecture. In addition, students choose to be active participants in the discussion, rather than to be passive recipients of knowledge in a lecture (McKeachie, 1978). Discussion gives students a more effective learning approach which can help them to achieve subject matter mastery.

Teaching Approaches in Kazakhstan

In recent years, the educational system of Kazakhstan has undergone serious modernization. There are not many current researchers who would shed the light on this process. One of them, Kurmangali Bekishev, wrote on this topic the most explicitly. Generally, as Bekishev (2013) states, the changes in Kazakhstani educational system were influenced by current globalizing trends in teaching methodology. The new developments have had a significant impact on methodological systems of education, as well as on criteria for selection of educational content. Bekishev (2013) outlines a variety of trends that together show how the function of the teacher begins to change, moving him or her from being the main source of information to a position of the "facilitator of the educational process" (p. 594).

In addition, there is a gradual movement from traditional to more competence based type of education, which encourages the development of the students' ability to apply the knowledge, abilities, skills, and experience that they obtained while studying for creative solution of problems: teaching nowadays does not imply a mere transfer of knowledge from teacher to student (Bekishev, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary for the teacher to be able to use a variety of approaches, such as those mentioned above, to achieve different educational objectives, as well as to be more careful in selecting appropriate educational content.

However, the educational system of Kazakhstan now faces several challenges which can prevent successful teaching approaches from entering the system. One of the main issues in the current educational system is Unified National Testing (UNT). The testing has been in use since 1999 in the Republic of Kazakhstan as a means of final evaluation of the students' educational achievements. For school students, this means the final years of secondary education have been filled with rote learning in order to prepare for the final examination (Kalikova & Rakhimzhanova, 2009), while teaching approaches which can encourage the development of creativity and critical thinking in students were not involved as much.

Fortunately, in November 2016, the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan announced that in 2017 the format of the UNT will be changed. Now school graduates will have to go through two stages of assessment: first, they will pass the exams at school on five subjects (mother tongue and literature, Kazakh language, history of Kazakhstan, maths and one subject, which they can choose); second, those students who are willing to go the university will have to pass the UNT of a new format (MES, 2016). The new format of the UNT has a greater variety of tasks and is aimed not only at evaluating students' knowledge, but also at their critical thinking skills. Hopefully, this would finally allow schools to change from exam-oriented education to the one that lets students to develop their own knowledge and critical thinking skills.

The actual methods which teachers apply in their practice nowadays unfortunately remain unclear in current research papers. Nevertheless, the very scarce data available suggests that teachers mostly use teacher-centered approaches (Akimenko, 2014). There is, however, evidence that the government is working to address this issue. For example, the *State Program of Education Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011–2020*, puts a high emphasis on training and professional development of teachers (MES, 2010). The Center of Teaching Skills at Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools has also been created for teachers to help them study innovative programs of teaching. The training in the center includes such modules as "The education process management," "Teaching in accordance with the age peculiarities of children," "The work with talented and gifted children," "The use of ICT and digital systems for improvement the methods of teaching," and others (Kultumanova et al., 2012). These modules have been devised to aid the professional development of teachers and to form the concept of a teacher-researcher.

The main aim of the system of professional development of teaching staff is to improve the professional competence of teachers for successful implementation of new tasks in conditions of education modernization. Overall, according to the *National Report on the State and Development of Educational System of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, "within the framework of the implementation of the first stage of the National program till 2020 the traditional system of professional development of teachers is cardinally improving" (Kultumanova et al., 2012, p. 43).

Meanwhile, the further problem pertaining to mainstream schooling is that many teachers do not help those children who are struggling academically. According to OECD report (2014), when parents were asked who offered to help their children when facing educational problems, 56.3% said that teachers provided consultations for students lagging behind. However, 27.8% said "teachers are not always ready to work extra with children falling behind in their study. Usually they keep in such students after school and just give them tasks for independent work" (p. 78). At the same time, 13.3% said that "many teachers believe that if the child did not understand material it is his problem" (p. 78), and only 12.5% approved that "after class lessons teachers work with students falling behind in study" (p. 79).

The lack of aid from teachers very often leads to parents turning to the alternative ways to help their children keep up with their studies. Private tutors are usually used quite extensively for this purpose. For example, 33.1% of parents used them to prepare their children for the UNT in maths and physics, while 12.4% employed tutors to help their children improve their English (OECD, 2014, p. 79).

All these suggest an unfortunate conclusion that currently, mainstream schooling in Kazakhstan suffers from the lack of progressive teaching approaches. However, with the help of new educational initiatives, as well as the new trends in professional development of teachers, the situation is likely to improve in forthcoming years.

Conclusion

While it is certain that there is no universal approach for teaching, there are a number of recognized teaching techniques and learning theories which can be used to teach students effectively. An effective teacher should be able to choose from the variety of approaches the ones which can best help to achieve certain educational goals. Direct instruction can be used to enhance students' performance in achievement tests, while more open and informal methods, such as group discussion are better for the development of creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving.

Being an effective teacher means considering each aspect of your teaching approach in order to choose the one which will facilitate your students the most. Only the knowledge of different approaches and the ability to apply them in practice can help the teacher to excel in his work and help to nurture the beneficial members of society.

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