

My Teaching Philosophy

I have a great deal of difficulty even writing down the words. It seems to me that by saying that I have a philosophy implies that teaching is an end in itself--which it isn't, or that teaching can be done as an isolated function--which it can't. The problem with teaching is that it is simply a step in what happens to someone else--and only sometimes.

Let me start with a word like "instruction". Providing instruction, is a skill. This is a much easier term for me since in my mind it allows a certain amount of independence from the person receiving instruction. I, like the Canadian Army, believe there are six principles of instruction. These are;

1. Interest: The target audience must be interested in what they are being presented and the presentation must be done in an interesting way so that the trainer has the group's attention and good will.
2. Comprehension: The subject matter must be presented so as to be comprehensible by the target audience. In a nutshell this implies that the information must be at or below the level of understanding of the audience. New ideas must be related to familiar concepts.
3. Emphasis: While we all believe that everything we say is important, it is more important to emphasize the main issues of whatever is being presented so that individuals can compartmentalize it.
4. Participation: The audience must participate in the presentation. This might be done through asking questions, performing a skill or interacting with the material of the presentation.
5. Accomplishment: The audience must leave the presentation with a sense that they know something more than they did when they first got there. Perhaps this is a newfound skill, or insight into some problem.
6. Confirmation: The presenter must have some idea about what the audience is taking away from the presentation. This may be determined through formal testing or something as informal as questioning or even conversation.

These are ICEPAC and they have been a fundamental guide to the way I present "Instruction" since I learned about them more than twenty years ago. If you do them, are coached while using them and believe in them you will become a passable "instructor". You will be able to present information in a reasonable way so that students are provided with a situation which promotes learning.

Let me now return to the idea of "teaching". Teaching has only happened if "learning" has occurred. And, unfortunately I, as an "instructor", can only judge myself as a "teacher" through what the students have learned. If they learn nothing, I have taught nothing.

What I find particularly interesting is the apparent ability of students to learn from almost nothing. For example, I currently supervise three graduate students who receive no formal instruction from me--and precious little else--but, based on what they say and do,

they appear, to learn. Does this have anything to do with my "teaching philosophy" or do they simply learn despite my best efforts to prevent it?

Something I find particularly disturbing is the lack of interaction with students due to extremely large class sizes instructors are forced to cope with. In 1999, I found myself lecturing to an audience of 325 first year computer science students taking their first course ever in the subject. Many passed the course, I'm not sure it had much to do with me or my philosophy.

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