In order to express my philosophy of teaching, I must address some of the underlying assumptions of my philosophy of education. This philosophy has emerged from many different influences, including academic training in learning theory, and pedagogy, life experiences as a student, years of teaching and listening to the voices of my students, and through observation and instruction of my university peers.

This essay will briefly define the foundation of my work as an educator. The core issues that will be introduced are that education happens intentionally as: 1) a social activity, 2) a moral activity, 3) the uniqueness of each learner is valued, and 4) an active process.

While learning happens constantly and often randomly, education should be a very intentional activity. And the first of the intentions is that it is a social activity. Plato (cited in Kaplan, 1950) described the reciprocal effect of society and the individual, with the individual contributing to the common good, and society being “paid back” by educating its citizens. Education should further the social characteristics of our nature so that we may work and live together. While I would not agree with all of Plato’s prescriptions for education (e.g., broad based censorship by authorities and communal lifestyle), I thoroughly endorse his idea that education should be egalitarian in nature—in the language of today “for all students”—as a social requirement. Searching for truth must be the heart of the educational endeavor. And this quest should be participated in by all.

In this effort, I take a more rationalist position, that each person innately possesses some ability for knowing and understanding (without following the position so far as to suggest the knowledge is also innate). The process of education is to educe, or to draw out from the student the potential and ability which the student already possesses. I also see this as a reciprocal event, in that my students draw out the best from me, when I am open to the drawing.

The second intention of education is that it should be a moral endeavor. Confucius (cited in Legge, 1893) posited some key ideas about moral education, needing to consist of five cardinal virtues: altruism, just righteousness, right and proper action toward others, wisdom, and faithfulness. He taught that these were all interrelated, believing the interrelationship between society and education very strong. The philosopher, Confucius, was known as the “Master Teacher” and as such he influenced a whole society for many hundreds of years toward moral living and a reverence for education. In America there currently is a renewed interest in moral or character education. I desire to be part of an institution which values leadership in the moral arena, through modeling and mentorship.

A third intention of education is that it should take into account the uniqueness of each student, respecting the beauty and individual perspective that each one has on the world. Often our education system works in just the opposite way, attempting to make all in the group think alike. I have seen this most evident in drawings of children. In preschool and kindergarten children draw with great creativity and abandonment. By third grade, their drawings have become more rigid, prescriptive and similar to one another. Of course there are cognitive developmental reasons for this also, but the educational system (including teachers and parents) holds some responsibility in not vividly reinforcing creativity and free self-expression.

In this issue of personal uniqueness, our educational system today has taken a wrong turn, down the path of self-esteem without a ground. Self-esteem is a critical element of personal development, trusting self to make right choices (as opposed to the overvaluing of the approval of others), self-efficacy, and valuing self enough to altruistically give self away. I believe some educational programs (some developed by misguided psychologists) attempt to develop self-
esteem in a vacuum, which the learner soon finds is a false hope, which then further weakens his or her ability to believe in those adults who should be more trustworthy.

Educationally, as Rousseau has suggested, through nature and poetry and literature, we may learn to identify and trust our unique feelings. Through cooperation in the learning environment we may learn what we believe and respect one another in the process. Through action we learn well the lessons of life ...

Keep your pupil occupied with all the good deeds within his power. Let him help poor people with money and with service, and get justice for the oppressed. Active benevolence will lead him to reconcile the quarrels of his comrades and to be concerned about the sufferings of the afflicted. ...In addition to college lore he will acquire the still more important ability of applying his knowledge to the purposes of life...

Rousseau (cited in Boyd, ed., 1956)

A fourth intention of education is that it must be an active process. Too often teaching takes the form of “doing something” to students to “make” them learn. This notion of the learner as the passive receptor of ideas was a key point of contention for John Dewey (1897). He argued that knowledge is attained through interaction with the environment. Schools should be designed with active participation of teachers and learners together. I agree with Dewey (and disagree with Rousseau) that education should be structured for exploration of problems, with teachers actively modeling the scientific method. As they both would suggest, education should be learner centered, with teachers seeing their work as art as well as science. The skill of teaching necessary content (translate reading, writing, arithmetic...and now computers) happens best in an interactive environment, where students see relevance and context for their learning.

A critical element of this active learning is instruction in how to ask questions and then, knowing how to seek answers. This is far more effective than for the teacher to tell the student the questions and the answers. In an amazing prophecy which could have been written today John Dewey (1897) wrote.

With the advent of democracy and modern industrial conditions it is impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be twenty years from now. Hence it is impossible to prepare the child for any precise set of conditions. To prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means to train him so that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities...

A final perspective on the nature of education involves the preparation of the educator (e.g., teacher, counselor, principal). In the above suggestions regarding the nature of learning it should be clear that the environment for learning must be intentionally established by the education system, teachers in particular. Educators must know how to develop social environments in which there is opportunity for reciprocal interaction between teacher and students and students with one another. Educators must be models of moral reasoning and action. They must be able to set up learning experiences for many ways of learning and self-expression. This means that the educator must be aware of his or her own preferred method of learning and develop skills to work with students who learn differently. Along with this educators must express genuine appreciation for students who are different from themselves in terms of class, culture, or belief system. Teachers must invest energy and risk to develop active ways of learning. This is quite different from merely developing fun activities for a class.

The knowledge base of the curriculum should be well defined and embedded in relevant, active, classroom behavior. For an educator this can be personally quite risky, because as the environment expands, control is often lessened. It takes great skill to establish and maintain quality discipline, and an open, flexible, active learning environment.
Finally, educators must have a fundamental knowledge of the developmental nature of the learner. Knowing how cognitive, physical, social, moral, and spiritual development emerge and interact will allow the educator to be prepared for the appropriate levels of challenge and support. This is quite an awesome set of ideals for a teacher education program, but I believe these are effective prescriptions.

Each of these previously mentioned attributes must be developed, or matured during educator training programs. I have seen my work as a counselor educator to be fundamentally no different than any other discipline in education, that is preparing future counselors to facilitate the growth and development of the students with whom they work. This includes cognitive, social, physical, emotional, moral, and spiritual development. While school counselors often work primarily in the academic and social arenas, attention to the whole student is essential.

As an administrator of professors of education, I hold the same principles for leading those with whom I work, believing that administration is also teaching. One final source of importance to me in this area has been the current work of Peter Block (1993). He has called us to management through service as opposed to self-interest. In this we would be co-equal workers toward a common cause, each accountable, each dependent but not co-dependent on one another. We would have self-esteem, respect for one another, and delight in the life journey of one another without trying to control that journey for the other.

References


