Reflections on Teaching in a Changing World

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Abstract: The paper is about the reflections on Dr. Carol A. Kirby's article "Teaching in a Changing World". Three sections are discussed in the article, including the why of change, the what of change, and the how of change. On each section, the ideas are introduced based on the author's understanding and the present teaching phenomena. It is hoped to provide some inspiration to the teachers in this changing world.

1 Introduction

The article "Teaching in a Changing World" is written by Dr. Carol A. Kirby, which is also the research achievements of the workshop of Jilin University-Lambton College. Nowadays, it is acknowledged that with the advancement of society and technology, teachers are faced with new technology, new ideas and new challenges too. (1)

All of these have caused enormous changes in every corner of the world, especially in the face of COVID-19 in 2020. As teachers in this special age, both of information and network, it requires such fundamental changes and even reformation that it is urgent for all the teachers to adapt to these great changes.

2 Main contents and reflections

The article mainly presents some ideas of teaching in a changing world from three aspects: the why of change, the what of change, and the how of change. It mainly aims to open a dialogue to the discussion of how we teachers of higher-education can adjust to the continuous changes in this developing world, meeting the changing needs of our students in creative ways while keeping the best in our blended teaching practice.

In the first section, the author talks about the reasons of change. Everyone can see big changes in many areas of life, yet our classrooms look basically the same as they have been for thousands of years. With a teaching desk on the platform in the front of the classroom and many students' desks in the center of the classroom, students always look, listen to and focus on the teacher, that is, the many are listening to the one. In China, this form of education can date back to Confucius times who is a great educationalist in the ancient Chinese history.

To our surprise, this tradition has been kept in the classroom till today. As a proverb goes for qualified teachers--To give students a bowl of water, a teacher should already have a bucket of water. In this analogy, students are treated as empty vessels waiting to be filled. No matter what a teacher is talking about, students seldom stand up to put forward questions or ask for clarification on the difficult points. It is the same case for teachers who hope to maintain their own glorious images in front of students. A teacher might feel embarrassed if a students happens to point out his or her mistakes since it is usually regarded as a challenge to a teacher's authority and prestige. To most teachers like me, it is fear that change will be difficult and will show up our deficiencies and weaknesses.

Now it is absolutely a different case. In Feb 2019, "The Education Modernization Plan 2035" was released by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the State Council, in which

8 goals were proposed. The five-year implementation plan specified 10 key tasks in advancing education modernization, including requirements on the enhanced use of information technology.(2) Whether it is difficult or easy, most teachers have felt the urgency of change. With the pandemic of COVID-19, both teachers and students have to stay at home to have classes. In front of the computer screens, everyone is equal. Students can press the Enter key and send messages to teachers without standing up or being stared by others. This is a good opportunity for those who are introverted. But, it is challenging to teachers, especially those elderly ones. It requires not only the teachers' concepts on teaching but also the teachers' computer operation abilities, including operating kinds of teaching & learning applications.

In this sense, education does not mean passing on textbook knowledge alone from teachers to students. Even in the earliest times, there was a concern that there was some dichotomy between "knowing" and "understanding". According to the author, the divide has also been described by many other educators in different terms "knowledge versus skills", "inspiration versus discipline", "insight versus information". All of these divides indicate that there exists a big difference between acquiring knowledge and applying knowledge. That's also the reason why change is necessary.

Then, a practical example is given by the author, which further proves the importance of change. Education has two major goals: 1) the passing on of information or knowledge; 2) the development of the skills, and attitudes and understanding that facilitate the application of such knowledge to new situations in academic and in personal life. Everyone is familiar with the first goal since it has existed in education for thousands of years, but the second goal is usually neglected.

In the past, the number of people who had access to knowledge is in minority, and a majority must learn from a minority. However, as the society and technology develop so fast, knowledge itself is readily accessible to everyone, anywhere, at any time. People ranging from young pupils to seniors are faced up with an explosion of knowledge. In this case, the role of teacher in imparting information is gradually losing its importance, and the new challenge is to shift from an initiator of information to an instructor of guiding students to obtain and apply information, that is, to direct our students to access, evaluate, and use the knowledge that is more available to them than it is to us teachers. Knowledge is not passed on for them to keep in their brains, but for them to apply to the solution to new problems.

Section two talks about the what of change. In reality, the higher education has developed so fast till today, the main characteristic of which is one thing -- change. [3] Based on the analysis of reasons why we change in section one, it is easy to get answers to this question--teachers should change from passing on information alone to teaching students to apply information. Correspondingly, students should change from the acquisition of knowledge to the processing of knowledge. The change requires us to shift our focus in the classroom teaching. Most teachers, including me, overemphasize the teaching contents and neglect the active participation of students who are going to apply the teaching contents in their future life or work. Comparatively speaking, the latter is more important than the former. Acquiring knowledge is easy whereas applying knowledge is much more difficult.

If the class time is spent totally on teacher talk, students could only achieve a small part of education. Only when we teachers are more likely to move into higher-level activities and more focus on analysis and understanding could we proudly say that our education has fulfilled its major functions. Therefore, to bravely make changes, teachers may get out of the role of class center, step down the platform, and be closer to students. Instead of lecturing alone in the front of the classroom, the classroom time may be divided into a series of activities--giving information, sharing information, exchanging ideas, processing information, and finally acquiring, comparing, validating or evaluating information. Based on this complex process, students can not only access knowledge but also understand and apply knowledge.

After discussing the why and the what of change, the author talks about the how of change in the third section. Specifically speaking, the change process is an abstract idea. So, to achieve the goal of change, this abstract idea must be transformed into specific tasks. According to the author, the tasks could be arranged as the following: 1) Decide on what is the basic information that our students need to have to master from the course; 2) Decide on the most effective method of exposing them to this information; 3) Apply new knowledge to expand, apply and transfer information to new situations and questions.

As for the first task, most colleges have done it very well since every college has constituted course outlines or teaching outlines for all the courses offered. In the blended teaching process, some contents are taught in the traditional way while some others are arranged online for students' automatic learning. So it

is necessary to tell clearly students about the teaching contents and learning objectives; otherwise students may feel confused what to do before or after class since they don't have a clear goal for learning the course. Anyway, in the past, what they have is just a textbook in hand, and no other learning resources are suggested to them. Then, what they can do is just to follow their teachers and learn passively. In this passive learning process, it is less possible for students to exercise their initiative, to use the previous knowledge to make analysis, and more importantly to master the knowledge and apply what they've learned to their future life or work. Fortunately, the network can help solve the problems of learning resources as long as teachers can be aware of these changes.

Then, when we are aware of this gap, we can move to the second task--choosing the most effective method of exposing students to these information. Some suggestions are here, such as distributing course outline to every student in class, encouraging students to ask questions, providing opportunities for students to practice, using flexible methods to evaluate students, making proper use of APPs etc. A good teacher always want to seek better ways of enhancing the learning environment and also to better understand the world in which our students move with ease and comfort.

There might be many other effective teaching methods, but the goal is single and simple-- to make certain that the students can learn the basic information needed to apply their learning to problem solving, to apply new knowledge to expand, apply and transfer information to new situations and questions. This is also the main activity of the learning process. As changing the focus of class that has been discussed in section two, other changes are required too. For example, we may use different learning materials, rely less on textbooks, rearrange the classroom desks and so on. All of these changes should aim at frequently interactive activities where students are passionately engaged in communication, problem solving, argument and the acquisition of new information.

3 Conclusion

All in all, to survive in this changing world, we teachers need to be ready for big changes. We need to review our practice, accepting and learning the new technologies, keeping the good and discarding the dysfunctional. We need to provide a safe supporting learning environment where making a mistake is a valued part of the learning process. We need to let go of control and allow our students to lead. With these big changes, we will be proud to say that we are qualified teachers in this new era. With these big changes, we will be proud to see that our education fulfills its major functions.

References

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