

Right Teaching and Teaching Rightly

Neeta Arora

Assistant Professor, Department of Education,
Shyama Prasad Mukherji College, University of Delhi

Abstract

Teaching as an activity, a process, is meant to facilitate learning. If all teaching would promote intended learning, the question, how appropriate or right the teaching is, would be irrelevant. But the fact is that questions like- What should we look for in a teacher? Which are the most significant abilities in a teacher? How can we prepare teachers to teach well? Are always alive and problematic. These are some questions that are not often consciously and justifiably answered. Appraisal of teaching necessitates the need for certain valid characteristics (Hirst, 1974, p. 78). What characterizes teaching needs an understanding of what constitutes teaching and what is its nature. These questions form the central theme that is explored in this paper. What all needs to be considered and in which order of priority by whom for teaching to be appropriate, adequate and effective? How much is upto teacher and how does it help to define it all for teachers become relevant matters of concern here

In an endeavor to understand teaching, we may visualise five different groups of students named A to E for convenience, from similar age range, attending Yoga classes, scheduled for a week each at different places/venues. Members of group A watch a video recording of yogic exercises and try to follow them. In group B, the teacher shows a video and instructs in detail, with step wise positions and breathing patterns, supervises each member and corrects them, as and when needed. The teacher in group C demonstrates live along with detailed instructions, cautions the limit to which positions should be tried and also directs about breathing while changing positions. In this group a wide range of exercises are done with daily variations. The teacher helps the students to recall the earlier exercises, through interaction. Students in group D are taught like group C with minor differences. They are introduced to a wide range of exercises without having to do the new exercises. The teacher allows and encourages questions,

discussions, doubts and engages with students to help perform the exercise when requested. Students are organized in groups to undertake some exercises together. The teacher in group E demonstrates, instructs, corrects, talks of wide range and finer variations in exercises and guides on why and how of the sequence of exercises. Attention of students is guided while they exercise to the pace and matching breathing with exercises. The rationale behind finer nuances in exercises is also explained to them. In addition to responding to queries, comments and experiences of students, the teacher finds the time to discuss the meaning and origin of Yoga.

Students in all the groups are learning Yoga, yet the skill, ability, understanding and orientation to Yoga would settle/embd differently in each of the different groups. This difference can be attributed to the different ways of teaching. "Teaching is a purposive and deliberate activity undertaken to

bring about learning” (Hirst, 1974, p. 80). Since learning would differ in levels of enabling, in the degree to which it would integrate with students’ other understandings, experiences and activities and identify which is the most apt teaching among all five situations and what makes it so.

As we characterize teaching, identify its most distinctive and essential features, we can perhaps address all of relevant issues on appraising teaching and teachers. This will also indicate towards effective teaching and quality of education, develop sound basis on which to select teachers and help to identify processes that will lead to preparing quality teachers. At the macro level, this will help to provide directions and regulations for teachers, and inform policies and rules targeted to improve teaching-learning.

‘Teaching’, as a concept, can have many meanings and may be viewed as an enterprise, a practice, an occupation, a vocation, an activity, and as a task. We will focus on the activity of teaching and discuss others when needed. It is a polymorphous activity, that is, many kinds of activities like drawing, instructing, questioning, demonstrating, writing, etc. are involved in teaching (Hirst, 1974, p. 79). Does that mean that without any of the listed activities, it cannot be called teaching or are some activities more central to teaching? Or is there a common element in all of these that characterizes them as teaching?

Teaching is informed and justified by three ideas. These “core ideas are about learners, learning and teaching, and these are shaped and modified by context, policy and culture....The third domain locates teaching –and children themselves- in time, place and social world, and anchors it to the questions of human identity and social purpose without which teaching makes little sense.” (Alexander, 2008, p. 29). Thus, teaching is for purposeful learning, within a context.

It is simple to see that a teacher teaches a certain subject to a set of students in some educational institution within certain framework of directions, regulations and situations. Implicit in teaching is some understanding of the students, their level, stage, interests, needs, problems, limitations which can be grasped with psychological, sociological, historical, economic, political and cultural understandings. For this, teachers need to have sufficient theoretical knowledge of the subject and that includes understanding its nature, development, principles, structure, method etc. They also have the ideas on teaching and learning (hopefully, consciously) and be able to evolve some pedagogy suitable to particular subject/topic, group of students, and situations.

The aims of teaching would always be operating through each teacher and would be based on some understanding of the world, of human beings and their wellbeing. All these align in teachers’ decisions and actions. The better the understanding of each of the aspects discussed above and their interrelationship, the better a teacher can call on her abilities to strive for the desirable in students. Different teachers may place greater importance on some dimensions and activities. This was evident in the case of Yoga teachers described above. Which of these is most characteristic of teaching? Emphasizing on which aspect is most important or appropriate? Is there a definite idea or standard of appropriate teaching? Or is subjective preference by a teacher to any of the dimensions right? Or are all these aspects equally important?

To reflect on the above, let’s see how each teacher has placed emphasis on certain aspects in her Yoga classes and try to assess. In the first group, the teacher is replaced by a video recording. The responsibility of learning, here, is largely dependent on students’ abilities and motivation besides the contents and their presentation in the video. Can technological measures fulfill what is essential to education or teaching? We have to

find out (or decide) what is essential or central to teaching to judge its appropriateness.

With group B, the video is used as an aid to teaching. Teacher is organized, skillful, pays attention to individuals and helps them to master the skills for the exercises, along with the video. In group C, emphasis is on both content and skill. 'How much' and 'how' are considered important while teaching. The teacher in group D welcomes discussions, interactions and feedback. She encourages freedom to think and question which increasing interest in learning. In addition to the practices listed above, the teacher in the last group E, is distinctive in her emphasis on helping students understand what they are doing. Her teaching weaves perspective and theory into what is being practiced. She attempts to guide students' attention to finer practice and makes them aware of it.

Students in group E are more likely to grasp the most in many ways, more than skill, knowledge or performance. They understand and appreciate what they practice and also know why they are doing, what it can do to them or their lives. This is close to what may be called 'initiation' of students to learning. It is not limited to skill, knowledge or application but is inspirational to initiate students to pursue Yoga in a way that lends meaning and sense of wellbeing to them. 'Initiation' is described as a "requirement that those who are being educated should want to do or master the worthwhile things which are handed on to them... generate desire to do what they thing is worthwhile" (Peters, 1973, p. 103). Learning is about the capacity of 'choice and self-direction' in relation to one's own impulses and to the world around (Oakshot, 1967, p. 156). Here, it is important to observe that the appraisal of teaching is in terms of learning, but not all or any learning; it refers to worthwhile learning. So appropriate/right teaching is about educating, some worthwhile learning.

'Right teaching' seemingly implies one right way of

teaching. Can we assert that all teachings other than E will always be considered inappropriate instances of teaching? Let us consider some circumstances : When student strength is large and the teacher is absent on a day (and substitution not possible), using video recording to follow Yogic exercises seems better option than canceling the class and turning students of group A away with nothing to learn on that day. What if teacher B is present but temporarily not in a shape to demonstrate exercises to help students learn? Here, using video recording to demonstrate seems appropriate measure for teaching. Widening the range of exercises and finer modifications may be relevant for students of group C if they have already done some Yoga exercises earlier. Extension of knowledge and enrichment through sharing experiences, clarifying doubts makes sense for experienced students (group D) who may have thoughtfully practiced.

Through the imagined situations described above, it emerges that even if any teaching of non-E groups cannot make 'initiation' possible, each could be most appropriate option under different circumstances. The point that comes across is that judgment of appropriateness can not be based only on the idea of education, but would be incomplete and inadequate without considering the diverse contexts as well. The rightness of teaching (what, how, etc) is to be judged with both sensitivity to context (diverse reality; what is) and aim of education (ideal, value). Teaching that is alive to situations, learners and one's own potential- the scope and limitations in each, can appropriately explore the potential for learning then and there. It requires a concerned, understanding, discerning alert teacher to gauge all this without any compulsion of instructions. A lot of effectiveness in teaching-learning is anyway at disposal of teachers' sensitivity, concerns, priorities and sensibilities.

That, by and large, rules out the adequacy of rule-bound or externally fixed standard-based appraisal of teaching and learning which are inconsiderate to

diverse human contexts. What kind of criteria can, then, be justifiably framed?

When we view teaching as an observable practice/act (therefore open to monitoring and improvement), that is, pedagogy constituting of building blocks of ‘task, activity, interactions and assessments. However, as they stand they lack the wherewithal for coherence and meaning’ (Alexander (2008) p. 31).

The coherence and meaning come from ‘teaching rightly’ that has basis in right direction, which requires some sense of purpose, concern, vision of what worthwhile is possible, and tap the potential in every situation while considering all- situations, students, one’s own abilities (understanding the scope, limitations and complexities in all). Such a teacher may act differently in different contexts. Acting as per rules, or even best practices is perhaps limiting and thus teachers don’t have to be so watchful, thoughtful and responsible.

Since teaching includes a whole range of activities in the vast and diverse contexts, what may be needed to find coherence and make teaching educative? Perhaps some reasoning, theories, tried and established measures (like best practices), or skills and techniques could help make teaching simple and effective. Let us see if such approach(es) would adequately meet the needs of apparently simple teaching situations discussed below.

To make students punctual to school, regular in home work, neat in handwriting and the way they dress what kind of efforts or whether to emphasise these matters has no straightforward, tried and tested/practiced correct way. One needs to understand the importance of such habits in becoming educated. Are these matters of discipline and/or enculturation and how necessary are they to education? How to address those habits that we place important for their overall development? These issues lead us to understand freedom and

authority along with other practical concerns to decide appropriately. One needs to think of implications of imposing, punishing, rewarding, letting be or encouraging and also know if changing their habits is possible through encouragement. Which is the best way to habituate the students and at which developmental stage? What are the constraints of time and energy placed on teachers? Each student is affected differently by the same measures undertaken by a teacher. All of these are significant considerations for any reasonable decision to be taken. This makes the process very challenging and requires many standards in finely different contexts while referring to conception of education. No ‘best practice’ or uniform rules may be effective for all students in all situations. The whole discourse on distinguishing teaching from training, conditioning and indoctrination is about understanding authority, responsibility and freedom in education, which is based on our assumptions about human nature and human development. Educationally sound measures are not simple and are not just matters of prevalent method (set ways) or workable technique.

Supposing student strength is very low on a particular day due to unavoidable reasons (say, bus strike or rain), whether to teach them or interact for their enrichment and interest or leave students to themselves and do other jobs or chat with other teachers on days when. There is another situation when fewer students choose to turn up and didn’t want any teaching on that day. What’s the most appropriate response of a teacher? Both situations need right perception beyond facts requiring right interpretations, discerning the intents of students and teacher herself and full implications of any stance. Deciding ones action on basis of mere observations or facts, rules or guidelines one may turnout to be inappropriate and irresponsible acts. This may amount to losing the educative potential of the situation, while remaining accountable to authorities. Any choice of action conveys some values, message and sets patterns for future also.

What would be educationally worthy, whether to be consciously consistent about such decisions and messages or do as pleases the teacher at that time? Imagine that students from a particular community have poor food habits and poor health which a sensitive teacher finds is affecting their learning. Whether the teacher should eat voluntarily with class sometimes to improve their food habits and help them be aware of food and appreciate healthy food choices or deliver a talk about it or call an expert to do that? She has to generate alternatives, evaluate which alternative can be more effective and feasible along with concern for learning and overall development of students, she might as well only pressurize students to ensure learning. The choice of method is also an evaluative exercise (of judgment for choice), with concern for students' development/change.

Another ordinary school situation that teachers deal with is about classroom organization, that is, about arranging seating of students. Whether to change seats or fix them for a session or a month and in which pattern to change, how about seats of students with special need? It has implications for justice in regard to equal opportunity for learning. Class rules and arrangements get addressed according to teacher's sense of justice and her will to exercise it. Justice "requires situation-specific moral reflection and sensibility" (Carr, 2000, p. 167). Fair and apt treatment for best learning would call for personal active and reflective engagement and yet proper detachment, not settled just by evidence or school rules.

How about ¹ teachers coming dressed as they like parts, may be with coloured hair, short dresses, tattooed and pierced body? What if a teacher likes some student and is physically involved with that student outside school?

Few more such aspects in school everyday are touched here -

students lagging behind in work, learning and ability may improve given special attention and support. Whether to do so? Whether the family and parents or teacher should attend to it? How should a teacher attend to it- in a class one may separate them as a group or merge them with brighter ones to improve them or arrange special remedy classes for them.

Whether teacher is to be personal- friendly, motherly, mentor-like, or formal and authoritative, or simply encouraging and respectful but does not share her personal/private life with them will affect students' learning in many ways. Or change the tone of approach in varied contexts for adequate reasons. Should such matters be framed for teachers as to what is right for a teacher? I am trying to say, there will always be some significant dimensions that depend upon the teacher's capacities and concerns so she has to discern.

Such issues emerge from teachers' sensitivity and concern and need complex discretion over perceptions, understandings, tuning to culture, educational and social practices, what's desirable, what possibilities, what alternatives and the pros and cons are involved and are not matters of skill, knowledge or management alone. Teachers' perceptions about her relationships with students, their needs, abilities, what promotes best learning in them and what constitutes their well-being will shape her teaching and conduct. Teacher's perceptions and beliefs set her relationships which set the discipline in class. Discipline is not just a matter of techniques of managing students, the 'firmness of character' of teacher also help set it.

1. The source of this idea was from sections '*Virtuous and Vicious Speech and Attire*' pp 214-218, and '*Professional Persona and Personal Probity*' pp 221-23 in Chapter 12, Ibid.
2. David Carr (2000) has discussed how teachers have to be self-consciously vigilant to establish non-threatening classroom climate of mutual respect and trust in section, '*Teacher Character and Personality*', pp 219-221 in Chapter 12 of '*Professionalism and Ethics in Teaching*', Routledge Taylor & Francis Group London and New York.

The teacher may believe that her teaching in the class is independent of her apparel in school or her actions outside school. What would a right stance be based on- school norms, societal expectations in these matters, student response to it, right representation of culture, freedom for unique preferences of teacher? Is a universal code of dress for teachers justifiable?

When schools try to simplify and have predefined rules and practices for all such matters, teachers' sensitivity, reflection, discretion become limited and irrelevant. The engagement with what should be, what would be appropriate becomes constricted, if not lost.

So, we see that teaching appears to be a set of tasks, series of acts, and systems may define 'right teaching' as institutional rules, practices and through accountability mechanisms (perhaps in tune with their mission and vision assertions). Yet we see that teaching is very complex, sensitive work

that demands and depends a lot from/on teacher as a person- teacher's style, personality, conceptions, perceptions, perspectives, understandings, of situations, learners, subject taught, oneself, to list a few, and importantly in line with ones priorities and sense of purpose. The quality of teaching (and education) perhaps lean heavily on such dimensions. Therefore teaching rightly is more flexible, yet more responsible teaching, where teacher engages reflectively with everything that can affect her decisions and practices. This may take us beyond the circumscribed rules and norms for 'right teaching'.

This has serious implications for what all should go into making right teachers and in which order of significance, and how. They need to be considered separately.