

My Personal Philosophy of Education

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**Abstract**

Education is the interaction between student and teacher that should seek to make students into lifelong learners who can think critically for themselves. These goals can be best accomplished through a blend of pragmatism, essentialism, and perennialism. I will treat every student fairly and never give up on any student because I believe that every student can learn. I plan to implement a variety of strategies in order to meet the diverse needs which exist in the classroom from simple differences in learning style to more challenging issues such as exceptionalities.

How is education accomplished in today's diverse, postmodernism classroom? This question is difficult to answer by itself without first defining what education itself is and what the purpose of education is. To me, education is the interaction between student and teacher that should seek to make students into lifelong learners who can think critically for themselves.

### **General Philosophy for Life**

First and foremost, I am a Christian. I believe in God. I believe that the Bible is the true Word of God. I believe that Jesus Christ is God's Son, and that his death allows all to come to Him for salvation. Most importantly, I believe that the purpose of life is to bring glory to God in every endeavor that we make.

My faith also guides me in my view of truth. In today's postmodern world, truth can be described as either absolute or relative. **Relativism** defines truth as a concept which varies from person to person and denies universal morality (Lewis, 2001). In contrast, **Absolutism** defines truth as unchanging and universal, meaning that what is true for one person or group is true for all people (i.e. murder is bad). As a Christian, I must believe in absolute truth since all truth comes from God (Ps. 119:160), and God is both immutable and universal (I Sam. 15:29, Mal. 3:6, Heb. 13:8). This argument, however, amounts to, "I am an absolutist because the Bible says so," and I know that that argument is less valid in a secular setting. Thus, I will attempt to logically defend my stance secularly. My first problem with relativism lies in the definition. Any definition of relativism I have found is composed of absolutes. The statement, "there is no absolute truth", were it true, would be an absolute truth. Lewis excellently summarizes this argument in his article on relativism: "total relativism absolutely denies any absolutes—and it absolutizes relativity" (Lewis, 2001).

Relativism says that when two people argue about a truth, neither are wrong; they simply hold different views. “The Allegory of the Cave” (Plato, 380 BC) illustrates this. In Plato’s allegory, a group of men are bound in a cave, facing a wall. Their captors are walking around outside. Since the bound men are facing the wall of the cave, all they see are the shadows of their captors. These men believe the shadows to be reality. These shadows are believed by the men to be real people and not shadows. One man is supposed to escape and see that the shadows are in actuality not real. However, since his fellow captives cannot see this, they do not believe him. Relativism would argue that both the escaped captive and the bound captives are both correct in their perception of reality since truth is relative. This is not correct as we know the shadows to be mere images of a person.

My arguments for absolute truth may make it seem as though I do not care about the perspectives of others; this is not the case. I believe it is important to take into consideration the views of all parties involved in any disagreement, even if one of the views presented is in direct opposition to my own views. It is important to approach all issues objectively and with a sense of fairness. This sense of fairness is an important value to me, as is the rationality it takes to be objective. What comes with this objectivity is even more valuable, but much more difficult to obtain: the humility to admit to being wrong.

My Christian faith defines who I am. It determines my views on several issues including my view on truth and my values. More importantly, it influences my view on education. Since every person is created in the image of God, it is important that every person be treated with the respect which that implies.

### **Philosophy Concerning Schools and Learning**

Educational philosophy is usually subdivided into two camps: transmission and transformation. Transmission theories, also referred to as traditional theories, are theories which were developed in the past and were shown to be effective. Transmission theories seek to transmit ideas from the past to future generations (Smith, 2017). Transformation theories, on the other hand, seek to transform an individual or society (Smith, 2017). Often times, a person will select a theory from one of these camps or cherry pick aspects of theories from only one of these camps, but I do not think either transmission or transformation is enough on its own. Aspects of both are necessary for a quality education.

The transmission theories which are often discussed are essentialism, perennialism, and behaviorism. Behaviorism is a theory which I disagree with wholeheartedly. This theory holds that education may be transmitted through behavior modification. Students are treated as neutral machines which "...can be made to want to do, and to do, what the behavioral engineers [teachers] want them to do!" (Braley, Layman, & White, 2003, p. 44). This theory completely dehumanizes the student and seeks, in a sense, to industrialize education with its focus on behavior.

Essentialism and perennialism, on the other hand, provide more of a focus on what is being taught rather than who and how. These theories refer to curricula which, respectively, emphasize the natural sciences or the mind (Braley, Layman, & White, 2003, p. 46). Little is said concerning the role of the teacher, yet it is safe to assume that the teacher is central as these theories were developed in a time before student-central education. These traditional theories are

the transmission theories which I hold to<sup>1</sup>, as they emphasize a broad spectrum of topics to be covered.

The point where I disagree with these theories is the presumed teacher-central nature of these theories<sup>2</sup>. Traditionally, the teacher is authoritarian, having power over the students, the curriculum, and how that curriculum is taught. These transmission theories also do not change as easily as they need to. This is where I turn to the transformational theories. The theory which most grabs my attention is pragmatism<sup>3</sup>. Pragmatism seeks to find “what works” in education and apply it to the classroom (Braley, Layman, & White, 2003, p. 38). One of the primary reasons I support this theory is that it allows the teacher to seek student input, which is vital in determining if the teacher is effective in his or her instruction. Pragmatism puts greater emphasis on “learning by doing, problems solving, ..., group processes, and [integration of] content and skills...” than traditional education does. One must be careful, however, when embracing pragmatism, as its student-centric nature can run away with the teacher, leading to teachers becoming complacent and permissive to the point of accomplishing nothing.

To me, what is most important in education is that we guide our students to be lifelong learners. **Lifelong learners** are those which are in a “continuum of learning” (Su, 2015). These learners learn both in and out of the classroom, and they continue their lives in a pattern of learning even when they leave academia forever. These students should be able to learn independently and should desire to learn. Pragmatism helps to accomplish both of these by affording students control over aspects of their education while the teachers use the child’s natural curiosity to guide them.

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<sup>1</sup> Although, I hesitate to label myself as an essentialist or perennialist

<sup>2</sup> This will be discussed more in depth in a later section

<sup>3</sup> Although, once again, I hesitate to label myself as a pragmatist

### **Instructional Practice**

Educational philosophy addresses the purpose of education, but how should that philosophy be implemented? To answer this, one needs to understand how learning occurs. Only after this epistemology is explored can teachers begin to discuss their approach to accomplishing the goals set out by their philosophy.

There are primarily three views on how learning occurs. Learners are seen as either active, passive, or interactive. Those who believe that learners are active believe that learners are intrinsically motivated by their own desire for knowledge, while those who believe that learning occurs passively believe that learners are extrinsically motivated to learn by their environment (Braley, Layman, & White, 2003, p. 170). Those like me who believe that learners are interactive believe that learning occurs when learners “take in information from an outside world and try to make sense out of it...using their innate capacity to know and to learn” (Braley, Layman, & White, 2003, p. 170). I believe that students need to be treated as active learners in some cases, passive learners in others, and in some cases they need to be treated as both simultaneously.

Due to the numerous ways in which students learn, as well as the diversity of the students being served, a variety of strategies should be implemented in the classroom on a daily basis. These strategies should be tailored to reach as many students as possible. One such strategy which can be customized to reach a diverse classroom is the “centers” strategy

**Centers** or **Stations** are small areas around the classroom where small groups of students gather to do school work of some time. Some centers are collaborative spaces, like a writing center, while others, like the classroom library, are not. Centers can be classified by subject or by other markers such as the classroom library, seatwork, or research, to name a few. In my

classroom, I plan on making centers only part of the day, likely the afternoon. One center would be reading, and the other centers would likely vary from day-to-day. Some days the classroom library might be a center, while other days, students may have a project they need to work on, making that the subject of a center. The reading center would allow me to work with students in different reading groups based on reading ability. I saw this used to great results in my Instructional Design practicum. The teacher was able to differentiate reading instruction for her students while the others were able to work on assignments for other subjects, which reinforced learning in those areas.

These centers would likely accomplish a great deal in the classroom. Instead of sitting at their desks all day, students are moving around and working on a variety of activities for each of the core subjects, which helps those students who need movement to stay focused. Centers allow students the opportunity to work in groups some days and on their own in others, with some types of centers allowing the opportunity to choose which they prefer. These centers also allow the teacher to differentiate instruction based on need much more easily, making centers a vital strategy for the classroom.

### **Relationship between Teacher and Student**

In determining which philosophies and strategies would work best for my students, I have looked into the roles of both the teacher and the student. How, then, should the teacher and student interact in the classroom? Traditionally, the teacher has been central, driving the education of each student in the classroom while the students passively absorbed education like a sponge. This model is not the best, however. Try this for yourself: take a sponge and soak it with water. If you leave that sponge out for a few days, most of the water will be pooled around

it, and there is always the chance that somebody will wring out that sponge at some point. No matter how much knowledge a child absorbs, it will eventually all run out. Furthermore, what does run out or is wrung out will look the same as what went in. Passive learners can only regurgitate what has been given to them. It is much more difficult for them to actually accomplish anything with what has been given to them.

The learner should take a much more active role in his or her education. The student should have a desire to learn, but often that desire simply is not there. This is where the teacher comes in. The teacher's role in education is to instill a desire to learn in students by unlocking their innate curiosity and engaging her students with the subject at hand (Braley, Layman, & White, 2003, p. 41).

With the learner taking a much more active role in his or her education, a certain degree of autonomy should be given to them. Students need to be provided with options as to how they show that they are learning<sup>4</sup>, and they should be permitted to select, to a degree, what they learn about. This is best accomplished when teaching a skill to a student. When teaching a student how to read informational texts, for example, the teacher can allow student to choose from an assortment of informational texts. When teaching a student how to research and write a research paper, the teacher can allow them to choose from a wide array of topics. By allowing students the opportunity to control what they are learning about, they are more motivated towards learning.

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<sup>4</sup> This is discussed more in depth in the diversity section

### Diversity

Relating closely to the teacher-learner relationship in the classroom is how the teacher handles diversity within the classroom. Diversity is a rather broad term describing differences from person to person. Since every student in the classroom is a unique person with their own set of skills and challenges, education must be made different, or **differentiated** in order to be effective for every student. It is, of course, extremely difficult to differentiate instruction for each individual student, but by giving students more options within the classroom, the teacher in essence delegates aspects of that task to the students. The teacher I worked with for my introductory practicum did this really well. As part of their textbook reading assignments, she gave her class a list of ten to fifteen options for show that they had read and understood the reading. This list included traditional options such as writing a summary paragraph, as well as less conventional options like composing and performing a rap about the reading. This batch of options, amongst other strategies are tactics which I plan to emulate in my classroom.

By providing so many options, she was catering to her students' multiple intelligences. **Multiple intelligences** refers to Howard Gardner's theory stating that the traditional definition of intelligence is insufficient. Traditionally, a person who is considered intelligent excels academically. Gardner proposes that seven kinds of intelligence exist, of which only two are academic in nature (Ackerman, 2012, p. 11)<sup>5</sup>. A teacher should account for these intelligences in each lesson by implementing activities for each intelligence throughout the lesson. Each individual is unique and needs to be taught uniquely to the best of the teacher's ability.

Multiple intelligences are not the only set of diversities a teacher needs to be aware of. What most commonly comes to mind when discussing diversity are exceptionalities. The term

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<sup>5</sup> If you want to learn more about Gardner's theory, googling "Multiple Intelligences" or "Gardner's Multiple Intelligences" should bring up some great information

**exceptionality**, as used in educational psychology, refers to a deviation from the norm. This can refer to, but is not limited to, learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders (ASD), attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) (Parritz & Troy, 2014). I believe that any student, whether exceptional or not, has the capability of learning. Learning simply occurs differently for exceptional students. Prior to the beginning of any school year, I will know what exceptionalities I will be dealing with. This will allow me to adjust lesson plans as needed. Sometimes all that is needed is a greater individual focus on a student. Other times, a student will need to be approached with a unique strategy for that student. Whatever it takes for learning to occur, I will do, using whatever resources are afforded to me. I strongly believe that every student can learn and will never give up on a student.

### **Conclusion**

Education is the interaction between student and teacher that should seek to make students into lifelong learners who can think critically for themselves. The blend of pragmatism, essentialism, and perennialism discussed accomplishes this through a focus on content and skills, and by the student and teacher working together to discover what works best in an academic setting of diverse students.

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