
Conception of Teaching: The Case of Higher Institutions' Instructors

Nigussie Kasahun^{*}

Introduction

It is apparent that most instructors of higher institutions are not trained to be teachers. Consequently, there is a limitation in their conception of educational terms such as teaching. The writer of this article was one of the participants of the Training Workshop Program on Teaching and Learning in Higher Institutions that was held from January 28 to February 19, 2002 and this training workshop gave me a chance to learn that the concept of teaching was understood by the majority of the participants in its limited sense. This was evident whenever participants were asked to define teaching in the discussions during the workshop. Their responses indicated that they regarded teaching as the imparting or transmission of knowledge. Thus, the purpose of this article is to comment on the drawbacks of this limited conception of teaching based on personal experience.

The Problem

Quality education is one of the demands of higher learning where qualified staff become the determinant asset for its realization. To be qualified, instructors have to be professionals and a profession is based on three types of knowledge - general, special and professional. It is the last type of knowledge that prepares one for a certain job. However, most instructors of higher institutions lack this knowledge and this has an impact on their conception of educational terms in general and teaching in particular.

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the same token, instructors' conception of teaching will influence their activity in teaching. Although there is no universally agreed upon definition of teaching, as is the case in almost all educational terms, there are substantial reasons to defy some of the conceptions more than others. One conception of teaching that has limitation is the definition that regards teaching as a process of imparting or transmitting knowledge. This conception is defective in that it refers to teaching without considering learning. But teaching is unthinkable without learning. Moreover, this conception negatively influences the selection of contents and method, and the understanding of the nature of the learner. How these are influenced will be discussed hereunder.

Content Selection

Though the conception of teaching is not the sole determinant factor, teachers' view of teaching is said to have influence in their selection of the subject matter. A teacher who conceives teaching as the imparting of knowledge is likely to select contents that refer to the lowest level of the cognitive domain because he believes that what is expected of him is transmitting knowledge. But what is expected of education is not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the development of skills, values and attitudes.

The development of the skills, values and attitudes can not be realized through imparting knowledge. Rather the development of such abilities requires engaging the learners in learning experiences which give them a chance to practice the desired behavior. As noted by Skinner (1953), *in order to acquire behavior one must engage in behavior*. This implies that there should be the engagement of contents and learning experiences that provide for mental operations and practical activities to bring about the development of the desired behavior. The limited conception of teaching indicated earlier will inhibit the use of the latter approach in which case selection of content is made to suffer from the imbalance of the three domains of learning, with focus only on cognitive domain at the expense of the

psychomotor and affective domains. This again will lead to emphasizing theory and producing men of words and not of deeds.

Selection of method

Teachers who believe that their role is to transmit knowledge will look for appropriate means of playing their roles and this influences their selection of method. The writer of this article has witnessed that the formal lecture method is dominantly used in higher education institutions. When this method is overused, as stated by Paulo Friere (1972), *Education will suffer from narrative sickness, where the teacher is the narrator, the subject matter is what is narrated and the students are the receptors.*

This again has another implication with regard to method. That is what Friere calls the *Banking Method*. By analogy, the teacher is the possessor of wealth, which is knowledge, and the minds of the students is the bank. The teacher safely puts his wealth in the bank, if at all learning has occurred, and checks its availability from time to time, by giving quizzes and tests and checks out his wealth when he needs it. This is done by giving examination. Such type of approach will lead to rote learning or learning for examination and nothing is retained after the examination.

The other drawback is that the conception leads to approaching teaching as a one way communication. The teacher remains to be a message sender, the subject matter the message, and the students the message receivers. But teaching has to be understood as a mutual interaction between the teacher and the taught and that communication has to be a two way communication.

The Learners

Learners, according to the above conception, are regarded as passive receptors of what is imparted by the teacher - as empty vessels to be filled or as *tabula rasa* who accept everything imparted as it is. This

approach denies the potential endowment of the human child - which refers to its ability to analyze, select, retain and make use of when the need arises depending on the physical and psychological makeup of the learner. This implies that there is a need to know and understand learners from different perspectives - educational, economic, social, cultural, physical, psychological and the like, to make the right choice of content and method to facilitate learning.

Conclusion

Though the quest for an exhaustive definition of teaching remains unanswered, the discussion above has tried to show that the definition which regards teaching as transmission of knowledge is very limited and has negative influence on the selection of content and method and understanding the nature of the learner. Consequently, the teaching-learning process is negatively influenced and the intended outcome may not be achieved. In addition to the lack of professional training, most higher institution instructors are of the opinion that what matters most in teaching is the mastery of subject matter. This is a wrong assumption which emanates from lack of knowledge and skill of the science and art of teaching, because teaching, as such, is not a mere transmission of knowledge but a planned, goal oriented activity that facilitates learning. To overcome this shortcoming, instructors of higher learning institutions should be trained as teachers or should be given short term training such as the one which is underway.

References

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