

Let's Be Realistic About Flexibility in Teaching

A limited but realistic repertoire of teaching methods will result in better teaching than a multitude of inappropriate ones.

Several educational researchers urge teachers to use a variety of teaching methods (Joyce and Weil 1980, Broudy 1972, Rosenshine 1979, Dunn and Dunn 1978, Brophy and Evertson 1976). They base their beliefs on one or both of two propositions: (1) students ought to achieve a variety of goals and, therefore, need exposure to a range of teaching methods; and (2) since students have individual learning styles, different teaching methods are necessary to attend to their different needs.

Unrealistic Demands

Using many teaching skills effectively in order to meet a range of student needs or objectives is both reasonable and supportable. Unfortunately, it is impossible.

Most teachers cannot employ a large repertoire of methods because of the limits of human ability. To ask teachers to use six or seven methods with equal proficiency is to assign to them machine-like qualities. They know which behaviors suit them and which do not. We must acknowledge human frailty when we suggest how teachers ought to teach.

But asking teachers to use a variety of methods is not merely a technological matter. Methods are not neutral; they carry, and are based on, value positions. For example, while it might seem sensible and wise, it would probably be counterproductive to expect teachers to be proficient in both information-giving techniques and inquiry techniques. To employ both methods, assuming that a teacher could employ them with equal skill, would require the teacher to embrace several conflicting beliefs. Information giving is based on the belief that students are attentive receivers of knowledge and that there is a body of knowledge that all students need to acquire. Inquiry is based on the belief that students are active, motivated persons who create and decide for themselves. By urging teachers to accept and use both information giving and inquiry,

we are asking them to believe that students, by nature, are reactive and docile and that they are active and can decide for themselves. How can one juggle these conflicting beliefs? Could not the confusion lead to the confounding of all methods and, ultimately, to the confusion of students?

Few Compatible Teaching Methods

What, then, should teachers be urged to do?

Teachers ought to use a *few* compatible teaching methods. To identify these few but compatible methods, they need to do two things.

First, teachers must decide which methods are right for them. This is a *value* decision, not a technological one. It is accomplished by clarifying beliefs about basic elements of education that underlie methods. These include at least the nature of students and the nature of knowledge, and probably should include the aims of education and the nature of teachers. After clarifying their beliefs, teachers can then study various methods and select those that are compatible with their teaching values, and therefore are compatible with each other. That is, the teacher can select just those methods that carry similar views of students, knowledge, teachers, and aims. This set of methods provides the behavior that a given teacher could use.

Second, teachers need to choose methods from the "approved list" that they actually will use. This choice is based on an assessment of their own abilities and on the effectiveness of various methods in particular settings. This is a *technology* decision. Presumably, most teachers will be more skillful at using some methods than others. Also, particular students and goals, as well as other factors, such as available resources and time constraints, will dictate which methods are most appropriate. From the set of valued methods, then, teachers should choose those that are most personally suitable and that fit the situation.

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The suggestion that teachers use a few compatible methods may result in an image of a consistent but inflexible robot. Not true. Teachers who follow this model alter their behavior, but not beyond the limits of their valued methods. This limited but realistic set of methods can adequately accommodate different learning styles and goals as well as provide excitement and interest in the classroom for both students and teachers.

Teachers are fallible and have individual predilections. Any prescription for teaching that does not start with this concession is destined for failure. A more helpful prescription for teaching than that which urges the use of a wide variety of methods is to use only those valued methods that are most appropriate for the teacher and the setting. Although this is what most teachers do unconsciously, the deliberate clarification of values and preferences may be one of the most powerful actions that can be taken to improve teaching. □

References

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