THE ASSESSMENT OF TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
A CRITICAL RETROSPECT AND A PROPOSAL*

PART II:
A PROPOSAL

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ABSTRACT

The first part of this paper (published in Higher Education, Vol. 4, No. 3) summarized fundamental defects in three contemporary approaches to the evaluation of teaching in higher education: assessment of learning outcomes, analysis of teacher characteristics and analysis of pedagogical behavior. The absence of a cumulative coherent theoretical framework for analysis obviated use of data from these sources in support of professional development or productive personnel decisions. A normative conception of teaching was argued as a necessity to justifiable evaluation.

In this second essay, the required conception is developed in a context of development of a capacity for critical norm-oriented human action as a central goal of higher education. In developing this conception, teaching is distinguished from other activities frequently incorporating the same techniques: conditioning, indoctrinating, brainwashing, training, informing and instructing. Intent is stipulated as the key factor. The stipulated intent is not to produce learning, but to "bring about" a specified sequence of intervening activities necessary to intellectual development required for attainment of desired general educational goals. A "gnemetectonic" sequence integrates pedagogical and student activities which are the foundation of the intended intellectual development. The gnemetectonic sequence and a model of intellectual development constitute the essential structure of a potential theory of teaching and the basis for a Teacher Assessment Program. This structure is realized in the construction of student and instructor report forms as a first step in the development of such a program. Data derived from these forms are based on minimal assumptions beyond those implied by the normative teaching model. Preliminary results from trial use of forms-in-development indicate the effectiveness of the model in discriminating teachers in terms of intent, course arrangements in support of that intent and student perceptions of consequences of these arrangements as related to instructor expectations. In addition, reports about relevant pedagogical aspects of a course are differentiated from preference-related reports of course "atmosphere".

Introduction

Before teaching can be observed, let alone assessed, it must be defined. Frequently, however, the presupposition is that teaching cannot really be defined at all, at least with any precision. At best, when any practical attempt to deal with teaching is made, an uncritical definition largely prevails: teaching is what teachers do. To lend credibility to this approach, investigators then ask observers (in most cases students) to describe which of the activities carried on by persons designated as teachers are acceptable or unacceptable to observers. After a sufficient sample has been polled, factor analysis purportedly indicates which clusters of behaviors are to be associated. A useful definition and suitable norms for distinguishing “good”, “acceptable”, and “poor” teaching are then thought to have been established. The process resembles a public opinion poll and the right to have an opinion is confused with having a right opinion.

As we saw in the first part of this paper (Johnson, Rhodes and Rumery, 1975), such crudely empiricist approaches are fraught with difficulties and dangers. First, data based on implicit and probably various criteria employed by observers can withstand little or no genuine critical analysis. “Good” teaching becomes nothing more than what persons asked about the matter say it is, whether they have any particular knowledge about teaching or not. These essentially private conceptions of teaching seldom have more substance than personal preferences; hence evaluation never reaches the level of informed judgement. Second, no clear ground for professional development can be provided, since it is impossible to specify what the professional acts of teachers actually are, let alone make any genuine qualitative distinctions in their performance. Finally, they provide minimal guidance for decisions about selection or retention of teaching personnel. As a consequence, in higher education, such decisions are commonly based on credentials certifying specialized knowledge rather than teaching competence.

TEACHING, SCHOOLING, EDUCATION: SOME PROBLEMS IN DEFINITION

Arriving at an alternative to the notion that “teaching is what teachers do” entails surmounting three chief problems. The first is the requirement that teaching be distinguishable as a specific and generic act or set of activities from all the other activities carried on by persons designated as “teachers,” “instructors,” or “lecturers” It is commonplace to say that a teacher performs many functions and fills many roles – for example, the traditional role of “kindly mentor of youth”. Serious attempts to analyze and clarify these institutional roles and functions in some detail have been made both for higher education and the common schools (e.g. Knapp, 1962;