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Key aspects of good teaching: a summary overview

3A

Background text

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1. Introduction

What makes a “good” teacher, regardless of gender? The answer will vary entirely according to the interpretation of the manifold tasks inherent in the teaching profession – teach, educate, consult, diagnose, innovate. But even if we limit the query to the key business of the school, classroom teaching, there is no possibility for a simple answer: (1) what is considered “good” teaching depends first and foremost on the underlying target criterion, as in “good for what?”: short-lived success in school or long-term success in studies and profession; subject-related professional competences or interdisciplinary key competences? (2) What is “good” depends also on the perspective, i. e., “good” from whose point of view? Classroom research shows that there are frequently considerable differences between the instructors’ self-evaluation of their teaching, collegial feedback and the student evaluations – see chapter 3 B.

The following reflections are concerned with the characteristics which are undoubtedly central to the quality of instruction, namely the learning effectiveness. This is based on decades of empirical educational research concerning instructional effectiveness and teaching and learning, not least due to the Hattie-study (2012), which combined the entire body of research worldwide with focus on the school performance, thereby providing a solid knowledge base.

2. Learning-supportive characteristics of instructional quality

In educational research there is a consensus: surface characteristics of organization (such as teaching across the curriculum, class size, etc.) are no more decisive for student success than the implementation of specific methods (such as frontal teaching or open learning).

What matters is the competence of the instructors, interdisciplinary deep characteristics of the quality, in any type of school, and for different age groups and subjects (which are therefore relevant for HLT as well).

The following deals with the principles of learning effectiveness.

2.1 Efficient classroom management as framework condition

The concept of learning -effective classroom teaching presupposes certain framework conditions, which can be summarized under the term “classroom management”. This includes (a) the establishment and consistent adherence to an interference-preventive system of rules, (b) the utilization of classroom time for “time-on-task”), (c) an efficient, i. e., sparse and least conspicuous handling of disruptions, as well as (d) the establishment of guiding principles, signals and procedures which simplify the teaching procedures and simultaneously reduce the burden on the teacher.

2.2 Promotion of information processing

A second large group of characteristics of instructional quality comprises direct measures to promote information processing; that is, the furthering and facilitation of acquisition and the storing of knowledge. A learning -effective teaching model is therefore an instructional approach with the following characteristics:

- Clarity

Intelligibility and comprehensibility from the vantage point of the students: coherence of the presented material, recognizable central idea, but also linguistic conciseness like clear diction, suitable rhetoric, correct grammar, manageable sentences and avoidance of awkward filler words, masking insecurity, and empty phrases (“somehow”, “what do I know”, “let’s say”, “quasi”) and ample comprehensibility (sound volume, appropriate modulation, utilization of standard speech, as well as refraining from excessive use of regiolect or dialect).

- Cognitive activation

This is the core of the learning effectiveness and concerns primarily the acquisition of learning strategies, learning techniques, and of metacognitive competences; that is, knowledge and control of one’s own learning. Extremely supportive for learning, according to the Hattie-study, are scenarios of cooperative learning whereby the students themselves temporarily assume the role of the teacher (reciprocal teaching and learning).

Here one encounters the widespread misunderstanding that teachers should retreat to the role of learning guides or moderators. Quite to the contrary, teachers must assume a highly active role at the beginning of such phases of cooperative learning and also for the acquisition of learning strategies:

Thus, the rules and procedures of cooperative learning must be carefully learned and practiced before they are functioning. Moreover, in the process of acquiring learning strategies, “demonstrating”, e.g. in form of thinking aloud, is an especially effective learning approach.

- Structuring

Facilitates learning through measures that improve the recognition of connections and relationships in form of structuring references (preview, summary, emphases, advance organizer or survey of the learning task).

- Non-verbal learning opportunities

The utilization of many possibilities of non-verbal learning settings, particularly the visualization (illustrations, graphics, mindmaps) and action-oriented learning, such as in form of scenic learning (for example “body mathematics”).

- Consolidation

Creation of sufficient opportunities for the application, practice and securing, in order to solidify what has been learned, and to refresh previous knowledge. Important in this respect is the consideration that – particularly in the linguistic field, e.g. in reading – certain strengths must be automaticized so that no unnecessary memory capacity will be absorbed. Only this way can more complex learning assignments be mastered. This requires “overlearning” up to automatization as well as “intelligent practicing”.

2.3 Promoting the willingness to learn

The following referenced characteristics are indirectly learning- effective: they further the willingness to learn, which in turn positively influences the performance.

- Student orientation

This implies that instructors have an insight into the individual learning processes of their students and try to view learning through the eyes of their students (perspective takeover, “cognitive empathy”). They are available as contact person for technical issues and interdisciplinary concerns, they involve students in decisions according to age and obtain student feedback in terms of learning behavior and student perception of the teaching process.

- Learning-friendly climate

The climate conducive to learning is characterized by mutual respect, friendliness, cordiality and appreciation by the teacher, as well as a relaxed learning environment, which may include occasional laughter and kidding– the opposite would be teaching in a “humor-free zone”, where there is “nothing to laugh about”. Of paramount importance for learning is most of all a positive error culture: mistakes which appear in learning phases will not be negatively sanctioned, but considered as a chance for insight into ongoing, but not finished or unfavorable learning processes, and to support the students with helpful, precise feedback and suggestions. This includes ample answer time for student responses and tolerance for slowness (“patience”) which are also elements of a climate conducive to learning.

- Motivation

The dream of an educator is to have students who “learn all by themselves” because they love the work associated with it, which provides them in the best case scenario with positive “flow” experiences. It would be naive, however, to expect in the context of school learning exclusively intrinsic motivation. An instructional approach that motivates, also stimulates extrinsic motivation, particularly through the thematization of the usefulness and importance of the learning assignment (for every day, for life, for the profession or the continuing school career). Other strategies conducive to learning are inquisitiveness (furthered through various offerings), competition (stimulated through competition with others and oneself) as well as social recognition (appreciation, praise from significant others, most of all from instructors and parents). It is often forgotten that teachers as role models are particularly motivating (“model oriented learning”): joy of learning, visible delight in teaching, engagement and enthusiasm have a direct effect (i. e., “emotional contagion”) on the students’ motivation for learning.

2.4 Competence orientation

In the past, it was sufficient to introduce something, i. e. “cover a subject” in class and to be guided by the appropriate schoolbooks and textbooks. There has been a fundamental change in the last two decades in this regard, namely in the focus on competences. A competence-oriented classroom follows somewhat different rules than the traditional “covering- a- subject” approach: curricula, assignments and instructional units are more oriented toward a targeted outcome, that produces the verifiable mastery of skills. This requires from the teacher greater diagnostic competences, i. e. the knowledge and the professional use of measuring tools to assess competences. For HLT purposes, consult the European framework competences for languages, which include instruments for self-evaluation of writing competences. (<https://www.uni-marburg.de/sprachenzentrum/lehrangebot/selbsteinschaetzung>).

2.5 Dealing with heterogeneous learning conditions

The alignment of instruction with continuously changing learning requirements is a core element of instructional quality, whereby “learning conditions” do not just reference differences in previous knowledge, but also characteristics of the cultural and linguistic background, learning preferences, gender differences, and disabilities (“inclusion”). The fundamental guiding principle is the fit (meaning that the learning situation and tasks orient themselves optimally to the student requirements); necessitating a variation of the content and methods as well as an adjustment of the task difficulty and instructional speed, commensurate with the circumstances. Important for the success of these measures of differentiation and individualization is that these – understood only as method or technique – per se do not represent a greater value relative to traditional instruction. Rather it depends on their quality: dosage, rhythm and timing, but most of all on the coupling with the previously described general principles of efficient classroom learning.

It is a myth that certain educational approaches are equally good or bad, learning -efficient or ineffective for all students in a given class – research shows clearly that there are robust interactions between teaching methods and student characteristics:

Therefore, students with limited prior knowledge and deficient skills need strong scaffolding, paced, short-step feedback and clear structures; with open learning and discovery learning these students would be overwhelmed. On the other hand, the more advanced students who have already acquired certain learning competences clearly benefit from open learning scenarios.

3. Outlook

Classroom instruction is not affected by principles or variables, but by teachers. As important as the theory-based knowledge of learning-effective teaching may be, the role of teacher's professionalism and personality is clearly and well documented. Although it is not the main thrust of this article, a few characteristics which are central to a teacher's successful professional activity should be pointed out; they are particularly relevant in light of student observations in Part 3 B. Germany requires that teacher education students have at least taken notice of the qualification profile of the teaching profession, be it through the portal CCT (Career Counseling for Teachers, CCT, see <http://www.cct-switzerland.ch/>) or the portal "Fit for the teaching profession" (Schaarschmidt & Kieschke, 2007; <http://www.coping.at/index.php?ft-l-nutzen#>). The latter inventory comprises a self-assessment and external assessments of 21 requirements relevant to the characteristics in four different areas: mental stability (ability to actively process failure, frustration tolerance, recuperative capacity and relaxation ability, stability under emotional pressure, stress resistance), activity, motivation and ability to motivate, (pleasure in dealing with children and adolescents, willingness to accept responsibility, humor, desire for knowledge and information, willingness to make an effort and tolerate hardship, inspire enthusiasm and professional idealism), social competences (assertiveness in communicative situations, social sensibility, self-assured manner in the public domain, friendliness/warm-heartedness) and basic skills and talents (voice, flexibility, didactic skills, expressiveness, and ability to work efficiently)

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