What has happened to our teaching?

Laura Colucci-Gray, 9.01.2022

An opportunity to reflect…

When the first lockdown was announced two years ago, many courses moved online. It was a relatively swift transition. Beyond the initial updating of technical skills and adjustment to the home office environment, the online mode enabled us to continue seeing our students; talk to them and, in some way, teach them. However, what was an apparently simple change of 'delivery mode' was - in fact - an expression of wider trends in science and technology and wider problems in society and the environment, which until then appeared to sit at the edges of our awareness.

In Phenomenology of Practice, Van Manen (2014) articulates the provocative method as a means to express the kind of ethical predicaments that are suggested by the phenomenon in question, and what are the active normative responses (advice, policies, communication practices and so on…) triggered as a result. The term *provoke* derives from pro-vocare, to call forward, to challenge, to incite, to arouse a feeling… it is action-sensitive and linked to ethical reflection. However, people differ in the way they experience a situation and so do their actions; rather than trying to anticipate or control responses, a provocation may be an opportunity to look more deeply at what might - up until that point – remained silent or hidden.

So, from an institutional perspective, the first line of action was to turn teaching into a procedure; 'viability assessments' were carried out to determine whether course materials taught online continued to meet the learning outcomes for students to graduate successfully. Tutors as well as parents, school teachers and children in school were asked to 'upgrade' their machines, their workstations and themselves, in order to teach and possibly learn.

Such response was unsurprising. Most of our lives as teachers - in higher education as well as in schools - have been dominated by technicist narratives, seeking to place the teacher in the role of the instructor and assessor of outcomes (notably, this is the language of many digital interfaces used in education). This framing of the teacher's role is rooted into a view of education as a scientific practice in a mechanical world which acquired some success since the early fifties and it is still standing. Speaking about this, Eisner (2002) wrote:

> *We live at time that puts a premium on the measurement of outcomes, on the ability to predict them, and on the need to be absolutely clear about what we want to accomplish. To aspire for less is to court professional irresponsibility. We like our data hard and our methods stiff—we call it rigor.*

But over the course of the pandemic this apparent sense of rigour and control did not seem to serve us well. We were presented with a scenario of uncertainty, stifling at times, and improvisational. We were overwhelmed by the effort to overcome the limitations of the online medium also, of our own acquired practices; challenged by the need to learn new approaches and do away with others, inevitably straddling beyond expected roles or well-rehearsed scripts.

Two years on, I am thus asking the question: what did this experience have to say to education - if anything - about the practice of education? And I n what way did the changes to our teaching trigger or enabled greater awareness of our role, our stance and our condition as teachers in a Higher Education Institution?

An opportunity to speak more precisely about the practice of education?

Speaking about drawing as an embodied practice, and if I propose to look at teaching as an embodied practice writ large, Fisher and Fortnum (2008) advance that there is an important pedagogical message in teaching from an explicitly 'risky' position of 'unknowing'. Crucially, the profound ambiguity of the outcomes from our teachings as suggested by Sawdon and Marshall (2015), allows a person to get a glimpse of what they do not know. Such a position acknowledges one's 'de-centred' place in the world, and enables one's curiosity to speak.

It is with this stimulus in mind that I wish to invite colleagues to share 'what has happened to our teaching'… at a time of significant transformation of social and educational settings as we have known them. Part of this conversation may involve the 'practical side' of having experimented with different methods to compensate for, enrich or override a situation deemed limited. But from a human and ethical perspective, other considerations may also involve the 'possibility of possibilities', inviting the chance to re-think and re-configure our ideas of teaching… and if this is the case: how? In what way? In which direction?

Under these conditions I am asking what other narratives did we explore/nurture/create for ourselves that we could reasonably add to the existing, dominant repertoires? There is no literature to date which brings together narratives of teaching with narratives of education in the digital world as the two appear separate in time and in space; one belonging to the past and the other to the future. Yet, as we are becoming aware of the limitations of linear approaches on a Planet that is changing every second as a result of our actions, I am interested in what might be other ways to speak of the educational relationship; of what it does and how it is enacted.

Going back to Eisner, this is what he proposes:

> *… a culture of schooling in which more importance is placed on exploration than on discovery, more value is assigned to surprise than to control, more attention is devoted to what is distinctive than to what is standard, more interest is related to what is metaphorical than to what is literal. It is an educational culture that has a greater focus on becoming than on being, places more value on the imaginative than on the factual, assigns greater priority to valuing than to measuring…*

Ultimately, I am asking to take stocks and explore if we can be more precise when talking about the practice of education; what might be the fundamental questions and drivers for our profession; have they changed? If so, how? And in what way could such changes be described, shared and made visible to ourselves, our colleagues and our own students?

Reference

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