

International Forum
Vol. 13, No. 2
October 2010
pp. 94-100

FEATURE

The Burden of the Teacher

Sunia Fukofuka

Abstract: The burden of the teacher is to show students how ideas are connected to each other. This is more necessary than ever in today's digital world. Teaching connectedness requires personal revelation as to values, priorities, and experiences on the part of the teacher, which can be disconcerting. Three principles for making teaching more connected are Defining the "real world," negotiating the real world, and contextualizing the content taught to the world as it has been defined.

I have seen the burden God has laid on men—Ecclesiastes 3:10

If the 'burden' of the teacher could be summed up in a label—it would be teaching *connectedness*. The teacher's role is to connect students to society's expectations, values, and traditions; to connect students with their inner selves; realize students' potentials; to connect students to each other as social beings; and to connect students with the possibilities and the future that could be theirs. It is the teacher's role to enable students not only to see the 'trees' in their individuality but also to see them in their entirety—the 'forest'! Perhaps that is why experience is a prerequisite to a graduate degree in most schools—because of the dawning realization that students must connect the theory taught in the classroom to its practice in reality (Mintzberg, 2004). In segmenting our subject matter, we may give students the illusion that life is compartmentalized, and hence the value of the education decreases. Definitely, seeing the forest is a must for teachers. And helping students see the forest is their burden.

There is a culture of disconnection that exists which undermines learning and teaching (Palmer, 1998), and that may account for students missing out on the big picture. It is the teacher's role to assist students in making these connections; but that is easier said than done. Palmer asserts that this culture of

disconnection is infused in the Western tradition of thinking in polarities. If the culture weaves disconnection, it is a tough task for schools and teachers to help students to connect learning with the multiple realities of life—but it must be done. Boyer (1987) argues that

an educated person [is] empowered with language proficiency, general knowledge, social confidence and moral awareness in order to be economically and civically successful. But becoming well-educated also means discovering the connectedness of things. (p. 16)

Making Connections

Seeing the “connectedness of things” is a concept that, in today’s fast-paced world of instant (and often frivolous) information, is more of a required life skill than a luxury. Doren (as cited in Boyer, 1987) claims that “the connectedness of things is what the educator contemplates to the limit of his capacity. The student [who] begins early in life to see things as connected has begun the life of learning” (p. 25). Connecting what is learnt to what happens outside of the classroom is the essence of learning, and we as teachers must teach this to students under our care.

Connectivism has been argued to be “a learning theory for the digital age” (Siemens, 2004). Siemens (2004) argues that learning theory has gone through several stages:

- Behaviorism:** Learning is about behavior change.
- Cognitivism:** Learning as a process of inputs, managed in short-term memory and coded for long-term recall.
- Constructivism:** Knowledge is created as learners attempt to understand their experiences.

These three learning theories treat knowledge as an objective (or a state) that is attained by reasoning or experiences. In this treatment of knowledge, some limitations should be noted. These learning theories presume that learning happens within the person but they do not account for learning that occurs external to the person, such as organizational learning. Furthermore, these learning theories stress the *process* of learning but not the *value* of what is being learned. The ability to distinguish between what is important to learn and what is not in a world where information is at one’s fingertips, for example, is synonymous with synthesizing and recognizing connections which none of these learning theories stress. Because learning theories focus on the process of creating knowledge, they do not account for the fact that knowledge is not acquired in a linear manner. Today’s knowledge creation involves multiple simultaneous inputs. The entrance of technology has highlighted the limitations of the learning theories. The need for information storage and retrieval is no

longer as important as it was because technology can do that for us. Rather, skills like how to present, how to find, how to combine different scenarios of knowledge to create new knowledge—synthesis and evaluation—are far more important in today's environment.

Since there are limitations to the old learning theories, Siemens (2004) offers an alternative approach to learning, which he calls the theory of connectivism. His definition of connectivism as a learning theory simply states that

learning is a process that occurs within nebulous environments of shifting core elements--not entirely under the control of the individual. [Thus,] learning is focused on connecting specialized information sets, and the connections that enable us to learn more are more important than our current state of knowing. (Siemens, 2004, Connectivism section, para 1)

This theory simply stresses the obvious—that the current knowledge we possess is not as important as knowing how to connect to other sources of knowledge, because learning is no longer an internal, individualistic activity. Siemens (2004) argues that as knowledge is needed but not known, the ability to connect to where that knowledge is becomes vital. As “knowledge continues to grow and evolve, [our] access to what is needed is more important than what the learner currently possesses” (Siemens, 2004, Conclusion section, para. 1). This brings me back to the burden of the teacher. The burden of the teacher is to inculcate in the student the ability to synthesize, evaluate and make connections with the sources of knowledge that is required to further the student's learning and enhance the possibility of his success in today's environment. This statement raises two questions: why is this important, and why is it the teacher's burden?

To answer the first question, we are living in a complex environment. The depth, breadth, and speed of our interconnectedness in this complex environment calls for teamwork. Underlying the teamwork approach is the realization that the complexity of the work environment cannot be handled individually. The team approach is a result of the realization that individuals can experience more positive results working together as a team than as individuals. Because of the information explosion and the knowledge-based economy that is today's reality, we are bound by the fact that the knowledge required to master today's environment is just too much for any single individual. In my mind, the knowledge that is crucial is knowing how to connect to the sources where the appropriate knowledge for the appropriate circumstances is located and how to synthesize these *knowledge pieces* into solutions. Hence most job requirements for teamwork are the basis of selecting the right person to connect with the other members of the team, because each person brings their own intellectual capital and area of expertise. The group's work, therefore, is to synthesize what they bring to the situation to create new knowledge that will provide competitive

advantage to their organization. That is why connectedness is important because it is a theory that makes allowances for the fact that we are currently living in a connected world—literally speaking!

Why is connectedness—as a learning theory—the teacher’s burden? In order to answer this question, we return to Palmer’s assertion that society promotes polarities which result in a ‘disconnected culture.’ In a nutshell, the disconnected culture is a result of the fact that teachers frequently teach their subject as compartmentalized and students do not see connections between what they learn in the classroom and real life. Thus, the teacher is the most appropriate person to change this mentality because the point where the curriculum comes alive for students is when the teacher teaches in the classroom. Palmer argues that

unlike many professions, teaching is always done at the dangerous intersection of personal and public life . . . a good teacher must stand where personal and public meet, dealing with the thundering flow of traffic at an intersection where weaving a web of connectedness feels more like crossing a freeway on foot. (p. 17)

Herein lies the burden of the teacher, because, according to Palmer, “as we try to connect ourselves and our subjects with our students, we make ourselves as well as our subjects vulnerable to indifference, judgment, ridicule” (p. 17). The reason is that when we teach connectedness, we are shifting from our subject matter—our area of mastery—to our experiences. Experiences teach us the connection of things because we continuously combine various knowledge pieces in order to accomplish life’s activities. Sharing these experiences with students in order to teach connectedness is what makes us vulnerable because we live in an academic environment that distrusts personal truth. This, then, becomes the burden of the teacher—the exposure of personal truth in the form of experiences shared publicly in order to teach connectedness.

How Do We Teach Connectedness?

Since the burden of teaching connectedness is the teacher’s, how then does the teacher accomplish it? Zyngier (2003), in his fourfold challenges of connectedness asserts that teachers and students must connect to the “real world in an organic and authentic manner that not only values students’ culture and needs but also adds value to their learning experiences” (p. 44). This gives rise to the first principle of teaching connectedness: *defining* the real world. This is by no means an easy task, for the vision of the real world that is selected usually depends upon the perspective from which the world is viewed. A common error that most educators make is focusing on the utility of what is taught in the classroom as it relates to workforce. Brennan (as cited in Zyngier, 2003) argues that schools’ purposes have narrowed too far to a “human capital” argument,

where schools are only valued for their contribution to the economic life of the nation and the future job prospects of individual students. Apple (as cited in Zyngier, 2003) warns that a student who is prepared for “real life” is a partial fiction, since schools institutionalize as “official knowledge” perspectives that benefit those who are already the most powerful groups in society (p. 43). If schools focus on the practicality of the education particularly teachers, they run the risk of ignoring the essential skills of critical reasoning that are vital for students to possess in order to make sense of the reality they come to. Thus it is important that teachers define the “real world” in which their students are citizens, for this is critical to the connectedness of what is taught in the classroom.

The second principle of teaching connectedness is *negotiating* the real world. When teachers communicate their conception of the real world to their students, they *must be* open to negotiation. Students’ conceptions about the real world are different from those of their teachers. With the advances in technology, students live their lives physically and virtually, hence their ideas of the “real world” may be quite alien to those that the teacher represents. For instance, the disconnect in the classroom may not be because of the content that the teacher is teaching but because of the chosen vehicle of delivery. Strom and Strom (2009) document the Olympia approach to teaching. As part of the mandated curriculum, students are required to co-teach with the teacher. The teacher provides knowledge of the topic, awareness of learning needs, and steps to guide lessons. The student is expected to contribute a visual element that makes the instructional presentation more appealing and better understood. This means that the teachers’ expertise is still valued and included, but teacher and students are connecting through the student’s conception of the real world. Over 1,200 schools have adopted the Olympia model for integration of technology with curriculum (Strom & Strom, 2009). Teachers must learn to negotiate the real world with the students in order to connect the student to a world with which both the teacher and the student are familiar and are willing to intervene in. Shor (as cited in Zyngier, 2003) asserts that teachers must embrace a “pedagogy which empowers students to intervene in the making of history . . . [and] prepare students to be their own agents for social change” (p. 43).

The third and last principle of teaching connectedness is *contextualizing the content* that is taught to the negotiated real world. There are two ways of contextualizing that would be discussed—contextualizing the knowledge through sharing of experiences and the actual living of the knowledge. Although Dewey wrote his ideas close to a century ago, it still holds true today. Dewey asserted that the teacher is not in school to “impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child . . . but to determine, on the basis of larger experience and riper wisdom, how the discipline of life shall come to the child” (as cited in Flinders & Thornton, 1997, p. 19). Based on his experience, the

teacher has the ability to contextualize knowledge so that students grasp its worth in their circumstances. This is crucial because students can connect the theory of the classroom to the realities of life through the lived experiences of the teacher. This forgoes the opportunity cost of living the experience. By opportunity cost I mean the time spent, financial, and emotional upheavals that are required to relive those experiences. Because the teacher is contextualizing content through the sharing of his experience, his life is also a signpost of connectedness. It is nigh impossible to teach what you do not practice and expect students to buy into it. Hence, it becomes a burden, for the teacher must live what he teaches.

In the end, the teacher is the best-placed individual to paint the connectedness of the world to his student through his lived experiences. It is through the teacher's shared experiences that the students will come to appreciate the beauty of the way things interact and affect other things. Truly, "no man is an island," and teachers must not teach as though everything could be separated into boxes. Should the teachers stick to their subject matter alone, they might send out students who are ill prepared for what lies ahead—the connected world! Gonzalez (2004) argues that the life span of knowledge is shrinking very quickly. The amount of knowledge that was known in the world is doubling every 18 months—an incredible feat. Connectedness allows students to harvest the full potential of the knowledge that is out there, thus making their learning useful to themselves as individuals, to the workplaces where they will be employed, as well as the societies in which they live. Can there be a more important burden for a teacher to have?

References

- Boyer, E. L. The educated person. In J. A. Beane (Ed). (1995). *Toward a coherent curriculum* (pp. 16-25). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Brown, J. S. (2002). *Growing up digital: How the web changes work, education, and the ways people learn*. United States Learning Association. Retrieved from http://www.usdla.org/html/journal/FEB02_Issue/article01.html
- Counts, G. S. (1997). Dare the school build a new social order? In D. J. Flinders & J. T. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculum studies reader* (pp. 24-30). New York, NY: Routledge Falmer.
- Flinders, D. J. & Thornton, S. J. (1997). *The curriculum studies reader*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gonzalez, C. (2004). *The role of blended learning in the world of technology*. Retrieved from <http://www.unt.edu/benchmarks/archives>

- Martin, L. L., Smith, H., & Phillips, W. (2006). Bridging 'town & gown' through innovative university-community partnerships. *The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, 10(2), 1-15.
- Mintzberg, H. (2004). *Managers not MBAs: A hard look at the soft practice of management and management development*. New York, NY: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Siemens, G. (2004). *Connectivism: A learning theory for the digital age*. Retrieved from <http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/connectivism.htm>
- Strom, P., & Strom, R. (2009). Trading places: Adolescents as teachers. *Adolescence*, 44(173), 21-32.
- Zyngier, D. (2003). Connectedness—isn't it time that education came out from behind the classroom door and rediscovered social justice. *Social Alternatives*, 22(3), 41-49.

*Sunia Fukofuka, PhD Student
Business Department
Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies
Silang, Cavite, Philippines*