Case studies of a traditional and a humanist classroom

Case study 1: A traditional classroom

In a study designed to discover evidence of John Dewey’s humanist ideas in high schools in Los Angeles, a group of 30 student teachers systematically observed the classroom practices of their master teachers during one lesson. They also administered questionnaires to the teachers. Class sizes ranged from 25–30 students and the master teachers had, on average, 25 years of teaching experience (range 5–40 years). The schools had been selected to give the trainee students “experience with superior master-teachers in a variety of socioeconomic and racial settings, … [the] schools represented some of the best educational practice available in greater Los Angeles” (Wilms, 1990, p. 245). Through group discussion, the students determined that Dewey’s ideas could be identified by three principles:

1. The daily classroom program included some educationally-purposeful activities drawn from outside the classroom.
2. There was evidence of continuity and progression in the subject being studied; i.e., the teacher draws on past lessons, or the students’ own interesting experiences, to help them see connections between one lesson and another.
3. There is evidence of a connection between external events and students’ inner thoughts and beliefs; i.e., the students appear to be fully engaged in the lesson and find connections between the subject matter and their own lives.

Results suggested that subject matter was “frequently” integrated with outside experiences in only about 9% of the classrooms observed. It occurred “occasionally” in creative activities, such as poetry writing, but most activities were routine, (e.g., completing a workbook assignment). More than half of the teachers provided continuity between different lessons, but only about 27% made links between classroom activities and students’ lives outside the classroom. This latter problem appeared to contribute to the students’ “lack of interest in their studies and the resulting ‘pandemonium’, ‘inattention’, and ‘mischief’, leading to the need for the imposition of teacher control” (Wilms, 1990, p. 248).

One student-teacher’s description of his master-teacher’s classroom is probably typical of many of the classrooms observed in the study. The student reported the
class began with a daily vocabulary test that was designed by the master-teacher as a quiet activity to settle the students down and get them “under control”. Once the test was finished, the rest of the day involved a series of lectures, some pre-recorded. When a lecture finished, the students completed exercises in their workbooks as a way of keeping them busy until the lesson ended. Students who raised their hands to ask a question were ignored, leaving some students confused and frustrated. The student teacher who had a placement in this classroom commented:

Dewey would cringe. There is no discovery, no stimulation, no exploration. The zest to learn, participate, discover and explore are clearly absent in room F-116.


Case study 2: A humanist classroom

Coralie James is about to begin a new teaching position at a primary school in the outer suburbs of a large city. The students come from disadvantaged home backgrounds and there are many who speak English as a second language. The school is old and dilapidated, but the Principal seems enthusiastic and the staff members are young and friendly. Coralie is to take one of three Year 3 classes in the school. The three teachers met before the end of the last school year and agreed to spend time together during the holidays, planning for the new school year. All had recently taken part in a professional development course offered by a local university. The topic of the course was “Humanism in the classroom” and they had spent time reading about humanistic ideas in education and developing strategies for introducing some of these ideas into their classroom practice. One of the books they read for the course was How to recognise a good school (Postman & Weingartner, 1973). Coralie will use their experiences in a case study of action research for a postgraduate degree she has just enrolled in.

At one of their meeting during the holidays, the three teachers agree to try to follow some of the principles identified in Postman and Weingartner’s book during the coming school year. They decide that, working as a team, they would begin by focussing on some of the characteristics of a good school listed under the headings: time restructuring; activity structuring; defining intelligence, worthwhile knowledge, good behaviour; and evaluation. These included the following.
Re: time structuring

- Time periods need to relate to what students are doing, rather than to a pre-set timetable.
- Learning rates for individual students vary; both brighter and slower students should not be rewarded or penalised. Learning rates are related to the interests of learners, rather than ability.
- Students need opportunities to learn how to organise and use their own time.

Re: activity structuring

- Activities given to students should be selected in terms of a rationale or empirical evidence of their relevance to the lives of the students, rather than simply on previous practice (“We always do this”) or dubious evidence (“It is good for the mind”).
- Students need opportunities to choose what they will do, rather than all being required to take part in the same activities. Allowance should be made for individual differences and for student participation in suggesting worthwhile activities.
- What students are required to do is worthless if they are alienated from the task.
- Students, not teachers, need to be active in learning. Activities are best when students have to do the “heavy work”; i.e. not just take notes from teacher talk. Students’ work parallels the type of work undertaken by scholars in that field (e.g., search of historical documents by historians).
- Activities may be confined to the school site, but should take advantage of resources within the community and of experiences that put students in touch with real people and real problems.
- Activities should bring together students with diverse backgrounds and abilities. Bright students are not disadvantaged by being with slow children and slow students gain from the contact (though if they are labelled “slow”, they tend to develop low self-esteem).

Re: defining intelligence, worthwhile knowledge and good behaviour

- Students should be encouraged to ask questions, solve problems and research topics rather than simply memorising and reciting information from lectures and texts.
• Active involvement and independence in learning should be encouraged, rather than passive acceptance.
• Knowledge needs to be valued, not for its own sake but for its use in daily life.
• Literacy should be defined as broader than reading. It should include other forms of communication, including talking, film-making, photography and so on.
• The knowledge revolution must be recognised and, as far as possible, students given access to new fields of study, such as computing, cybernetics, musicology, anthropology, meteorology.
• Self-knowledge is important and students should be helped to understand themselves, their own behaviour and feelings.

Re: evaluation

• Responses to student work should be reinforcing rather than punishing, with grades awarded for good work and no grades given for poor work. Approval is more effective than punishment.
• Individualised procedures should be followed where possible, with no homogeneous grouping or labelling of students, no permanent records kept, privacy in communication of grades to students and self-evaluation of work. The evaluation process is another learning experience.
• Students, not schools, should be encouraged to work out their own priorities for learning, to overcome the traditionally narrow focus of schools and allow for the diverse interests and abilities of students.
• From the beginning, the goals of learning need to be made as explicit as possible to students, so that they know what is expected of them. To achieve this, the final examination is first given at the start of the year so that students know what they are expected to learn.
• Standardised tests should be used minimally, to ensure that they do not dominate what is taught. Tests should be derived from what is taught, not what some test-maker includes in a test.

Coralie and the other Year 3 teachers met each week during the first school term to talk about their experiences in following Postman and Weingartner’s principles in their classrooms. They had begun by introducing some of the ideas that involved the structuring of time and activities. The greatest problems they encountered concerned the flexible use of time and the difficulties associated with allowing everyone to finish what they were doing at their own pace. Their next concern was to find ways to use
resources outside the school, in the community. At the end of the term, they reviewed what they had achieved and were pleased with their progress. Plans were made for the next term.

Activities

1. Look at the list of principles and identify the one in each set that you think Coralie would have implemented successfully. Justify your choice.

2. Now choose from each set, the principle that you think would have been most difficult to implement. Why?

3. Are these humanist principles appropriate for teaching in the 21st century? Give reasons for your decision.

4. If you had been one of the teachers in Coralie’s team, would you have agreed with the decision to implement humanist principles in the Year 3 classrooms? What problems would you have foreseen? Explain your reasons for the decision that you made.

5. If you needed to convince the principal of your school about the benefits that would be gained from the introduction of cooperative learning strategies, what arguments would you use?

References
