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Reflections on pedagogical activities

“The hypodermic needle” theory was a prominent theory in the early days of media effects research. The basic idea was that media messages were injected into the mind of the passive receiver without any resistance, where the message would then shape the receiver’s perceptions and attitudes on a given issue. Of course, today nobody believes in this idea of ‘almighty media’ anymore and media effects research has resulted into much more sophisticated theories of the reception of media messages.

The rejection of “the hypodermic needle” theory holds an important point in regard to teaching as well. Students are not passive receivers whose minds can be injected with messages from the teacher, and if the insights and points that the teacher tries to get to stick in their heads go over their heads they will not learn a thing from even the most well-prepared and insightful lecture. In other words, teaching does not have a one-to-one effect on students’ learning. It does not mean that teaching is pointless, but rather that teaching should be viewed as a means to students’ learning rather than an end in itself. When planning courses and lectures the teacher needs to take into account the goals for learning outcomes, his or her own teaching which must assist learning best possible, and the students who are supposed to learn, because just like media effects the effects of teaching depend on the individual characteristics of the students.

Goals for learning outcomes: It is important to think about the desired learning outcomes of a course and of the individual teaching sessions. This helps to structure the teaching that assists learning and advances the desired skills and competences. It also helps the students that they know what they are supposed to learn and especially why they are supposed to learn exactly that. How does the course fit in to the study program and what is the basic idea of having this specific course? It is also useful for the teacher in regard to constructing an exam that evaluates how well the learning goals are achieved and for the students in order to know what criteria they will be evaluated by. One caveat is that if goals are too narrowly defined it might obstruct other learning outcomes which are not contained in the specific goals. Therefore, learning goals should not turn into a straitjacket that renders everything that does not relate to the goals unimportant.

Teaching: Learning is generated in interaction between teacher and students and the teacher cannot entirely control students’ learning. Thus, teaching should be more than merely a transmission of information from teacher to students. Students generally learn more when they are challenged to engage in reflection on the subject of the particular course or lecture. The good teacher has a toolbox containing many different methods that can be applied to encourage students to engage in and reflect on the subject at hand.

Everybody knows that not every tool in a toolbox fits every situation. If you want to put a nail in a wall you take out your hammer, and if you would rather put a screw in the wall you need your screwdriver. This is equivalent to teaching – a method that engages students in one context might not have the same effect in another context. It is not enough to be well-prepared on the subject of the lecture. It is also important to prepare which tools to apply in order to challenge and engage students best possible in reflection on the subject.

This means that students’ learning is a shared responsibility. The teacher must assume responsibility for providing the best possible conditions for students to engage in reflection and critical thought and students must assume responsibility for utilizing these conditions. What makes up the best possible conditions is very much dependent on context, which makes it hard to put up general statements on good teaching. I have own my rules of thumb that I believe apply more generally: 1) Clarify the purpose of the course and the individual teaching lecture, 2) illustrate through concrete examples how abstract theories materialize in everyday life, and 3) engage students in independent critical reflection on the content they are presented with – e.g. through written assignments, oral presentations, or discussions in smaller or larger groups. These general rules of thumb still leave room for translation into concrete practice in the individual courses and teaching sessions.

Students: The teacher’s choice of tools for specific courses and lectures should always be based on the students who are supposed to learn. The choice of tools is obviously conditioned on several factors.

The number of students in the course is one aspect to consider. With more than 80 students enrolled it is a challenge to engage everyone in discussions and it is difficult to have students report back from independent group work. This is much easier with a lower number of enrolled students. Their academic level is another aspect to consider. Students in their first year cannot be expected to engage in discussions and critical reflection on theories and concepts as much as the more experienced students who have had academic training and know of contradictory theories and are able to enter them into a discussion.

The level of basic motivation is a third aspect. Is the course a mandatory course or is it an elective course in which a higher degree of internal motivation can be expected? Is the course at the heart of the study program or is it by many students considered a necessary evil? This should also have an impact on how the teaching is planned and how the purpose of the course is presented. Connected to this is the nature of the study program. Teaching at both the political science study program and the journalism program means that you among many of the students encounter two different approaches to education. Journalism students are often more focused on a practical and hands-on way of learning, while political science students seem more comfortable with theoretical and abstract learning. This has implications for the number of examples and exercises that should be included in the teaching.

Thus, taking students into account will assist the teacher in choosing the most suitable methods for the course and the individual teaching sessions, which at the end of the day will lead to the best learning outcomes. To plan a course taking into consideration the goals for learning outcomes, the students that should achieve these goals and the tools that should be applied to assist the students in reaching these goals is an iterative process, because the three are clearly interconnected. It is also an on-going process where adjustments are made throughout the whole course to ensure the best possible learning outcomes.

Teaching

Journalistiske Værktøjer: Journalistisk innovation

Morten Skovsgaard
01/09/2016 → 31/01/2018

Journalism and Society I

Morten Skovsgaard
01/02/2015 → 30/06/2015

Research methods and techniques

Morten Skovsgaard
01/02/2014 → 30/06/2016

Political Communication

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Journalism and Society II

Morten Skovsgaard
01/02/2012 → 30/06/2014

Seminar: Media Scandals

Erik Albæk & Morten Skovsgaard
01/02/2012 → 30/06/2012

The History, Ideology and Ethics of Journalism

Morten Skovsgaard
01/09/2011 → 31/01/2015

The History and Ethics of Journalism

Morten Skovsgaard
01/02/2011 → 30/06/2012

Research Design, Methods and Techniques

Morten Skovsgaard
01/02/2011 → 30/06/2011

Media Sociology 3

Morten Skovsgaard
01/09/2007 → 31/01/2009

Supervision

Co-supervisor for PhD-student Kim Andersen

Morten Skovsgaard
01/01/2013 → 01/01/2017

I have on average supervised five master thesis a year in journalism since 2011