

McCrink, C., & Melton, T. (2009). Models and methods of teaching. In E. Provenzo, & A. Provenzo (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the social and cultural foundations of education*. (pp. 511-514). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781412963992.n247

MODELS AND METHODS OF TEACHING

From the educational practices of Mesopotamia to current interest in technology infusion, a variety of ways to teach have been developed over the centuries. Models and methods often reflect the society's goals for education and its other values. Whether the student is an active partner in the process also varies over time. This entry summarizes the history of teaching methods and examines more closely two primary strands: traditional teaching and progressive teaching.

Historical Record

Models and methods of teaching, or different educational practices, date back to the preliterate societies

in ancient Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq). As city-states flourished (c. 3000–500 BCE), three major civilizations—the Sumerians, Akkadians, and Babylonians—developed the framework for the teaching of literature, writing, mathematics, and astronomy. Indeed, it was in the ancient Babylonian city of Ur that the tenets for the “traditional” or didactic model of teaching and learning are evident. Clearly, the Babylonian school curriculum centered on the memorization of literary works, emphasis on cuneiform script, and the focus on mathematical achievement; the teaching methodology was one of drill and practice reflecting the basic levels of what modern-day educators will identify as Bloom’s Taxonomy—knowledge, comprehension, and application.

Around the sixth century BCE, the Greeks established questioning and experimentation as educational practices in their quest for the foundations of a democratic system of government. In China (c. the fifth century BCE), Confucius focused his teaching methods on ritual and discipline toward formulation of ethical conduct and a cohesive social structure. Socrates, the Greek philosopher, affirmed the art of questioning as the essence of intellectual reasoning or *logos* (Greek for logic). The Socratic model became the catalyst for two eminent building blocks in the history of teaching and learning—empiricism and critical thinking. These constructs were to constitute the higher-order thinking skills in the Western mind and, thus, align with Bloom’s higher-order thinking skills—analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Aristotle emphasized empiricism and critical thinking in his Lyceum (school), and his legacy transcended through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment to the present day.

The methods of teaching in the twenty-first century are grounded in the classical or traditional practices of the ancient world and the modern-day progressive theories of Bloom, Dewey, Freire, and Perry, to name a few.

Classical or Traditional Methods

Examples of classical education include that of the Egyptian school, the rhetorical school during the last period of the Roman Empire, and the Confucius school. In Egypt, education and writing (hieroglyphs) were interdependent as the aim of societal literacy

was the preservation of religious texts by the scribes (priests). In this context, teaching was focused on the writing of moral essays in preparation for the development of a disciplined mind. In Roman education, participatory citizenship was the main objective of a teaching methodology where students learned the art of rhetoric through speech exercises that focused on the recitation of poetry and the characterization of historical figures such as Ulysses. In China, Confucius focused his teachings on the symbiotic relationship between ethical conduct toward an acceptable social order and political philosophy and the individual’s existence. Confucius promoted the idea of relying on classical works and influenced the development of comprehensive assessment that was to transcend through centuries.

In essence, the classical or traditional methods of teaching, then, focused on an integrative framework, where a “didactic” in lieu of a “critical” theory prevailed, through a teacher-centered learning environment in an effort to produce good citizens. In this context of teaching practices in the ancient world, it is worthy to note that these societies were homogeneous within themselves, notwithstanding the salient dichotomy between an upper and lower class structure and, thus, the absence of an egalitarian system of education.

A Progressive Pedagogy

In the *Yale Report of 1828*, Jeremiah Day, president of Yale University, launched the campaign to uphold the classical curriculum as an imperative for the “discipline and furniture” of the mind. Albeit the content of the Canon—great works of literature throughout the ages—serves as the knowledge base for the understanding of the human experience, the context of “how” and not necessarily “what” to teach is the topic of debate among all educators—from K–12 to post-secondary levels. Terminology such as “a constructivist approach to teaching,” “critical literacy,” “experiential learning,” “service learning,” and “student-centered learning” (to name a few) is commonplace as educators work to identify those methods of teaching that will develop critical thinking skills in all students in spite of a diversified student population across schools, colleges, and universities.

Whereas the didactic model of education tends to place the teacher at the center of the learning process, teaching that is “critical” focuses on the construction of a learning environment where students are active members through stimulation of intellectual curiosity, while respecting each other’s cultures as well as learning styles. Within this context, the teacher’s or professor’s repertoire of methodology or practices should be one where there is a balance between memorization of facts, as necessary, and the evaluation of constructs.

Some examples of critical theory teaching methodology include active learning, technology infusion, and experiential learning.

Active Learning. As in the schooling of ancient Roman times, poetry may be a powerful teaching tool toward conveying the relationship between the human experience and/or culture and a democratic society. In a critical theory or critical literacy platform—one where the teacher takes into account the diversity of learners—selected works (poems or prose) may be identified that allow students to connect their personal experiences to the work. In this context, students can work in small groups and analyze the issues behind the literary work, given a specific period in history. Such a methodology is reflective of John Dewey’s philosophy of progressive education, rooted in hands-on learning, as well as Paulo Freire’s pedagogy, which stresses dialogue.

Case study analysis calls for a collaborative, action-learning environment whereby the balance between knowledge base (content) and its application through discussions, vis-à-vis analytical writing, become essential for the ultimate evaluation of a problem or situation. Within this scenario, students must consistently practice Socratic questioning as they engage in individual as well as group reflection. Indeed, case study analysis can take the place of a formative-type assessment or continuous learning experience, while emphasizing student engagement, oral and written communication skills, and higher-level thinking.

Technology Infusion. Modern-day technology may be used effectively at the K–12 and postsecondary levels toward maintaining the balance between the “what” and the “how” to think. In the elementary

grades, for example, visual images serve to stimulate intellectual curiosity about different ethnic groups, forms of artwork, and so on. These images may provide the introduction to cultural awareness, which will later translate to questioning and reflecting about students’ own communities and, ultimately, the world around them.

At the university level, the use of “discussion forums,” where students must post questions in response to others within a synchronous (limited time-frame) context, will provide opportunities for prompt analysis, synthesis of information, and evaluation of an issue or problem. Such an exercise will require all students, in spite of the diversity in learning styles, to become active learners and think holistically about the role of technology as one of several interdependent factors that frame today’s global arena.

Experiential Learning. Perry’s theory of contextual relativism—the connection between an individual’s experience and the intellectual realm—is evident in experiential learning opportunities. The portfolio development approach used by some colleges and universities enables students to reflect on prior learning or work experience through comprehensive journal writing. This exercise calls for students’ self-reflection as they analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information.

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See also Classical Curriculum; Critical Literacy; Critical Thinking; Teaching Profession, History of; Trivium and Quadrivium

Further Readings

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