

*From Teacher to Facilitator of Learning**

I was brought up to think of a teacher as one who is responsible (“accountable” is the current jargon) for what students should learn, how, when, and if they have learned. Teachers are supposed to transmit prescribed content, control the way students receive and use it, and then test if they have received it.

That is how all my teachers had performed. It was the only model of teaching I knew. When I was invited to teach at George Williams College in Chicago shortly after World War II, that is how I taught. At first I was pleased and proud concerning my performance. I was a pretty good transmitter. My content was well organized, with a good logical outline. I illustrated abstract concepts or principles with interesting examples. I spoke clearly and dynamically. I brought forth frequent chuckles. I invited interruptions for questions of clarification. I had lively discussions and practice exercises following my lectures. My tests were fair and produced a good curve of distribution. I remember feeling so good when my students did what I told them to do, which was most of the time. Most of the students were preparing for careers as YMCA secretaries, and they were conscientious and well behaved. They took notes, did homework, and were able to feed back on the final exam (most of what I told them), with the A students remembering my very words. I felt psychically rewarded by

*Malcom S. Knowles. 1981. *Educational Materials Catalog*. Follett Publishing Co.

251

252 FROM TEACHER TO FACILITATOR OF LEARNING

being such a good transmitter of content and controller of students.

I was really a good teacher.

I had started taking courses toward a master’s degree in adult education at the University of Chicago a year earlier, and my first courses were with teachers who did just about the same things I was doing in my course. Toward the end of my course at George Williams College, I enrolled in a seminar in psychological counseling at the University of Chicago under Professor Arthur Shedlin, an associate of Carl Rogers. I was shocked by what happened at the first meeting. Some 15 students sat around the seminar table for 20 minutes talking small talk. Finally, somebody asked if anyone knew where the teacher was. One of the people responded that his name was Art and that he had been designated by the Psychology Department to meet with us. Somebody else then asked if there was a course outline. Art responded, “You would like a course outline?” Silence for several minutes. Another student broke the silence by saying, “I’d like to know why everybody is here—what did you come to learn?” So we went around the table, stating our goals and expectations. When Art’s turn came, he said, “I am hoping that you will help

me become a better facilitator of learning.”

NEVER BEFORE WORKED SO HARD

I won't attempt to reconstruct the ensuing events, but I can tell you that during the following week I read all the books Carl Rogers had written, located students who had taken the seminar and asked them what it was all about, and developed a plan for student inquiry teams, which I presented at the second meeting (which was adopted, with some modifications). I never read so many books and articles and worked so hard in any course I had ever taken. I had never before experienced taking that degree of responsibility for my own learning, alone and with other students, as I did in that seminar. It was exhilarating. I began to sense what it means to get turned on to learning. I began to think about what it means to be a facilitator of learning rather than a teacher. Fortunately, my next seminar, with Cyril O. Houle, reinforced this line of inquiry.

After my completion of the seminar with Cyril Houle, George Williams College asked me to teach adult education methods again. That was the day I decided to switch from being a teacher to being a facilitator of learning. At the opening session I explained to the students that I wanted to experiment with a different approach to teaching, and described my own experience in being exposed to two role models—Shedlin and Houle—of the role of learning facilitator. I confessed that I was not secure about my ability to bring it off, since I had never done it before, that it would only work if they agreed to take a higher level of responsibility for their own learning, and that I wouldn't do it if they felt the risk was too high. They unanimously agreed to experiment with me.

I spent the rest of the first meeting having the students introduce themselves and identify their special interests and resources. I distributed a syllabus that listed the objectives the course was intended to help them accomplish and the content units (I called them “inquiry units”), with references to resource materials that would lead to the accomplishment of the objectives. I asked them which inquiry units they would take responsibility for during the week. In the second session I had them volunteer for the inquiry units they were especially interested in, and we formed “inquiry teams.”

The inquiry teams met, with me as a roving consultant and resource person, for the next four weeks, and then the rest of the semester was spent with the teams putting on “show and tell” sessions. I had never seen such creative presentations and pride of accomplishment. By the end of that semester, I was a confirmed facilitator of learning.

INQUIRY UNITS AND TEAMS

When I analyzed what had happened to me, I was able to identify very fundamental changes. My self-concept had changed from teacher to facilitator of learning. I saw my role shifting from content transmitter to process manager and—only secondarily—to content resource.

I also experienced myself as adopting a different system of psychic rewards. I had replaced getting my rewards from controlling students

with getting my rewards from releasing students. And I found the latter rewards much more satisfying.

Finally, I found myself performing a different set of functions that required a different set of skills. Instead of performing the function of content planner and transmitter, which required primarily presentation

INQUIRY UNITS AND TEAMS 253

skills, I was performing the function of process designer and manager, which required relationship building, needs assessment, involvement of students in planning, linking students to learning resources, and encouraging student initiative.

I have never been tempted since then to revert to the role of teacher.