EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND LEADERSHIP: WHY IT MATTERS

As I have moved through the hierarchy of educational leadership positions, I have been asked on more than one occasion about my educational philosophy. The first time this question was posed, I stumbled through an answer; but, luckily, it did not stop me from getting the job.

But after the interview, as I mulled over my answer, I gave serious thought to the questions: What was my educational philosophy, and why did it matter? I grappled with these questions, and what I present here is not exactly the same answer I gave 15 years ago. Yet, the basic tenets are the same. Just as I have evolved and grown from my life experiences, so has my philosophy.

My educational philosophy, represented graphically, would be an architectural structure, with its foundation grounded in constructionist theory, as espoused by Dewey, Piaget, and Vigotsky, among others. It is the belief that knowledge is not transmitted, but rather is constructed.

Some may question if it actually makes any difference in our everyday endeavors whether we consider knowledge to be about some “real” world independent of us or whether we consider knowledge to be of our own making. I believe the answer is yes—it does make a difference because as educators our epistemological views dictate our pedagogical views. And, it is this tension between our desire to teach the truth and present the world as it really is, and our desire to let learners’ construct their own world, which requires us to think seriously about epistemology and pedagogy. How we think on this subject dictates how we teach and the words we use to convey meaning.

From an educational foundation based on constructionist theory, visualize the Parthenon—a multi-pillared structure. I speak to three of these pillars.

- **Learning styles.** Research shows that individuals process, store, and retrieve material in unique ways, based on their preferences and learning styles; therefore, as good teachers, we need to teach to all levels. To do this we need to be good observers. If we are good observers, then we can detect when students understand the material and when they need more instruction or information.

- **Andragogy theory.** Knowles’ adult learning theory is characterized by the idea that adults need to find value in what is being taught. By incorporating more than one subject into the lesson plan, using thematic teaching, applied learning, and just-in-time instruction, students remain more engaged. This has been correlated with an increase in comprehension and an increase in retention of the subject material. These approaches, as well as others, have been effective in contemporary classrooms, especially at community colleges where classes are characterized by students of widely varying learning abilities.

- **Academic rigor.** We should hold students to high standards. Challenging assignments not only benefit the high-achievers but raises the bar for all.

At the top, framing the roof of my design, is the academy: faculty, staff, students, and administrators. “It takes a village to raise a child” is an African axiom that comes to mind. And although some would like to believe that it is the instructional element that is at the top of the status heap, think back to your own experiences in college. Learning takes place outside the classroom as well. We learn how to interact with staff and the administration, we hone our interpersonal communication skills with fellow students, and our social skills are tested with all of the above! And finally, I think of lifelong learning. Although it is not part of my educational philosophy, it is systemic and encompasses everything.

So what is your educational philosophy? Why did you become a teacher? What do you believe about student learning? What is the role of teachers? How do these answers guide your leadership style? These questions and more should help define your educational philosophy, refocus you on what is important, and refine or re-examine your role as a leader.

This analogy of my educational philosophy is only a snapshot in time. As I gain experience and knowledge, it
evolves; however, my epistemological view is framed by these concepts, creating the thesis of my leadership and decision-making style. And, as I gain more knowledge, so too does my philosophy. The main colors are there, but there are shades and gradations of color that enrich my experiences and so, too, my philosophy on learning. If you have not examined the question “What is your educational philosophy?” since you took that class in graduate school, dust off that old paper you were required to write and take another look. It could be that guiding compass for which you have been looking, and it should inspire you throughout your career.

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