The Difficilitator; Or, How to Make Things Hard for Your Students

Abstract

University educators have often emphasized the notion that the best teachers are facilitators of learning. The implication is that teaching should be a process of making things easier for students. Thus, while facilitation clearly has a place in universities, if we embrace the facilitation model too wholeheartedly we may find we have lost more than we have gained. Indeed we may end up with students who can easily complete assigned tasks, but we may also find we are assigning tasks that are not worth completing.

From time to time university teaching centres forward me their newsletters; I enjoy looking through them to find tips and thoughts on teaching. Recently, I came across the following comment by an award-winning language teacher in one of these newsletters:

_Overall, I consider myself first and foremost a facilitator who opens up avenues and encourages language acquisition while respecting students’ different learning styles. But my goal is not merely the transmission of knowledge, skills and personal attitudes. I am also concerned with the personal, social and intellectual development of students._ (Charron 9)

I suspect most university instructors will find nothing unusual in this passage for the very good reason that there is nothing unusual about it. Indeed, the relaxed, first-person tone in this passage suggests the author takes her position as relatively uncontroversial and that underlines the point: university instructors who think a lot about their teaching, are less and less likely to fashion themselves with words like teacher or educator. Increasingly, as professionals, we are thinking of ourselves as facilitators of learning. Is there much that is laudable in such a view? Of course. Is there something dangerous? There is that too.

The English word facilitate appears in the early seventeenth century, and its meaning has since remained largely unchanged. (OED 1). Descending from the Latin facilis, meaning easy, to facilitate is, simply put, to make things easier. This is, approximately, the sense in which educators use the word, too, when they call themselves facilitators (a more recent, nineteenth century variation on the same word). The aim of the modern university facilitator, then, is to create an environment where learning can happen more easily. But it seems to me that education very often involves, or ought to involve, that which is not easy, and I have noticed both as a student and as a teacher that very often the best learning happens not when things are made easy but when they are made difficult. And while those who view themselves as facilitators can and
presumably do see the value in challenging students with difficult work, the more we embrace facilitation as the nature of education, the more likely we are to operate on the assumption that if good teaching involves making things easier, then easier is always better. That, in a word, is the danger. I would like to argue then that, while it is admittedly very often important to be a facilitator, it is just as often, perhaps more often, important to be a difficilitator, the one who makes things harder.

The facilitation model is so wide spread that the refusal to think about teaching in terms of challenge is easy to miss. At first glance, there seems to be nothing contentious about the following advice on designing tests from Barbara Gross Davis:

*Put some easy items first. Place several questions all your students can answer near the beginning of the exam. Answering easier questions helps students overcome their nervousness and may help them feel confident that they can succeed on the exam. You can also use the first few questions to identify students in serious academic difficulty.*

*Challenge your best students. Some instructors like to include at least one very difficult question—though not a trick question or a trivial one—to challenge the interest of the best students. They place that question at or near the end of the exam.* (248)

To be sure, Davis makes a gesture towards the notion of challenging students with difficult questions, but notice the difference in emphasis. The especially easy items are multiple, “several questions” compared to the single, especially difficult, question called for later. And though Davis begins by suggesting there may be multiple challenging questions by suggesting “at least one,” by the end of the paragraph she has made it clear that just one is plenty since “that question” (not *those* questions) should be placed at the end. Moreover, the especially easy questions are given as an absolute requirement of good testing. Davis, using the imperative voice, tells us unequivocally to “place” those items on the test. By contrast, the difficult question is given the air of an optional extra, not something that the reader must do, or even should do, but rather the whim of only “some instructors” who do not include challenging items out of a desire for intellectual rigour, but merely because of personal preference; they “like” to do so. “Place” now is changed to the indicative suggesting that this strategy is what others do; it is barely advice at all. And even with all that qualification, Davis still has time to remind us not to make the difficult question too difficult lest it be considered a “trick.”

To be sure, the reluctance to challenge students is an important and problematic aspect of the facilitation model. But just as troubling, if not more so, is the tendency to move from facilitation
into modes of education that exclude fundamental aspects of higher learning. I am thinking particularly of the acquisition of knowledge and thinking skills as goals of post-secondary education. To be blunt, acquiring sophisticated understanding in scholarly disciplines is difficult. For some it may be practically impossible. But facilitation implies easiness. Whatever the material—if it’s taught correctly—there must be a way to make it easy. Faced with the fact that knowledge and skills acquisition is difficult and learning should be easy, facilitators sometimes resolve the problem by devaluing the acquisition of knowledge and skills themselves as secondary, if not wholly inconsequential. Recall the passage with which I began:

Overall, I consider myself first and foremost a facilitator who opens up avenues and encourages language acquisition while respecting students’ different learning styles. But my goal is not merely the transmission of knowledge, skills and personal attitudes. I am also concerned with the personal, social and intellectual development of students. (Charron 9)

Notice the second and third sentence. Whether university instructors should actively be interested in the social development of their students is, to my mind, highly debatable, but what is more concerning to me is that word “merely.” Placing this word in front of “knowledge, skills and personal attitudes,” which themselves are contrasted with various kinds of personal development, the writer clearly implies that knowledge and skills are relatively trivial matters. It is as though, for the author, it is time to move on from old-fashioned things like knowledge and skills to more interesting matters. Moreover there is nothing to signal that the author sees this position as being at all radical, but when did we, as a profession, decide that “merely” transmitting knowledge was unimportant? When did intellectual skills and attitudes (as opposed to the vague “development”) cease to be a priority?

The above writer is by no means alone in devaluing the acquisition of knowledge in the name of facilitation. Here is Josie Gregory discussing the topic:

Facilitation literally means “easing.” Its art is drawing out the wisdom already embedded and lying dormant in the psyche of the learner. One approach of humanistic education and pragmatic constructivism assumes that learning is a recovery of or remembering that which we already know. Some believe that this inner knowledge is lost in the plethora of what we are told we should know and from a tendency, it would seem, to forget what we know. Facilitation may thus be seen as reawakening our latent talents and store of unconscious wisdom. (80)
Gregory’s view may work for some kinds of teaching, but it seems unlikely to be helpful for those undertaking serious scholarship. It seems unlikely to me that the significance of the publication of Shakespeare’s first folio in 1623 is “lying dormant” somewhere in the psyche of all my Shakespeare students when they come to the first class. For that matter, I highly doubt the details of human anatomy are in there, nor are my hopes high for finding a clear sense of anthropological theories of religion and rationality. Likewise, nothing in my experience would lead me to conclude that the ability to write strong analytical prose is inherently stored as “unconscious wisdom” in many of my students. Of course, Gregory could not possibly think so either, and so to maintain her position, she must implicitly suggest that none of these things really matter, that the accumulated wealth of scholarly knowledge is not a hard-won triumph of a civilized society, but merely a mass of fashionable nonsense, the “plethora of what we are told we should know.” I shudder at the thought of one day undergoing surgery with a team of surgeons educated in the Gregorian mode, men and women who have not bothered with what medical scientists thought they should know.

If an overemphasis on facilitation can mislead us, what is the alternative? What would difficilitation look like? I would like to offer two specific strategies, both related to an issue central to my discipline, English, but I hope the principles will be relevant to all fields.

**Give Students Assignments They Can’t Handle**

Facilitators often insist that students must not be given tasks that are too difficult for them lest they become frustrated. Fair enough: asking a first year literature student to write a hundred pages on the theological complexities in Shakespeare’s *King John* is patently unrealistic, but the reverse, asking students only to do work they have already mastered, is equally absurd. At some point students must be asked to do that which they have not mastered, that for which they are, at the moment, unprepared. At some point, a runner training for a marathon must go further than she has ever run before. A student seeking to expand his intellect must at some point do what he has not been able to do in the past. This is the paradox of learning. But that paradox is not always embraced by those who advise us on assignments. Take for example, this advice from California State University, Chico:

> Effective writing assignments engage students actively with material about which they are or can become knowledgeable. Students can only write successfully on topics about which they know and understand. Effective assignments, then, make clear the basis of that knowledge and understanding: For example, are students to apply concepts learned from course reading? If so, what scaffolding does your assignment provide to help students learn those concepts and how to apply them? How will you help
students to bridge the distance between what they already know and new, unfamiliar ideas about which they are expected to write?

Again, the motives are admirable, and the advice is, in part, axiomatic. Less admirable is the assumption that students can set off on the process of learning and writing only after they have been carefully prepared, only after the “scaffolding” has been erected for them, only with the nervous professor hovering hen-like over them at every step, helping them with every concept, and bridging every difficulty. Such an approach is not only insulting to students, it imparts to them the sense that they can only learn by being told, that they are not independent learners—the very opposite of what I take to be a sound education, and ironically, the opposite of what one often hears from the very writers who emphasize the facilitation model. The student here may appear to make a transition from novice learner to expert but may really only change from an absolute novice to a novice with guidance.

**Give Unclear Topics**

Absolute clarity is the cornerstone of the advice that I have seen on designing good writing assignments. The argument for clarity seems unimpeachable: the clearer your assignments, the easier for the student to produce what you want. Maybe. But consider the following list, meant to describe effective writing assignments provided by the University of Maryland:

1. Assignments are provided and explained in writing.
2. Writing assignments are linked to significant course objectives.
3. Notices of assignments specify the purpose for writing, the audience to be addressed, the mode or form of the writing, and its length.
4. Assessment criteria are specified.
5. Due dates are specified.
6. Longer writing projects are organized in stages.

I take no issue with what is here, but as advice for helping students learn to think in profound ways, it is remarkably pedestrian. Does such a list really describe the assignments that taught you the most in your undergraduate years? When you first decided to pursue scholarship, was it because the due date was clearly specified on your assignment?
Imagine if our educational developers gave us lists like this one, my own revision of Maryland’s model:

1. Assignment requires students to use with confidence, words they would have previously had to look up in a dictionary.
2. Assignment keeps student up at night later than is strictly healthy.
3. Writing assignment requires students to read types of writing they never knew existed.
4. Assignment challenges, but ultimately confirms, students’ faith in their own abilities.
5. Assignment sparks outrage among at least 25% of students.
6. Assignment humbles students.

This list is incomplete, highly subjective, and number two is admittedly a little flippant, but I would seriously maintain that every one is more provocative and ultimately useful than the bland Maryland fare. Moreover, asking these kinds of questions allows us, as teachers, to consider the ways in which difficulties are deeply productive. How many of us can recall undertaking assignments that at the time seemed impossible, or wholly unreasonable, or downright diabolical? How many of us now admit that those were the assignments that taught us the most? As with the proverbial birds thrown from the nest, students develop from fledgling learners to profound thinkers by virtue of dramatic challenges.

And thus I object to advice like this from the University of Hawaii:

Students particularly like assignment sheets that guide them through thinking processes and writing processes. If given only a list of "provocative questions," students often write little more than unlinked paragraphs that answer the questions. In contrast, if you give your students information on their audience (e.g., peers, field professionals), purpose (to demonstrate, illustrate, or persuade), and genre (research proposal, critique), they are more likely to learn and to write more effectively. Students also really appreciate advice on getting information, organizing their first draft, editing, and even using a word processor.

I have no doubt that the author is, in one sense, quite correct. Students will doubtless find it a real hassle to respond to provocative questions (notice the implied sneer in the scare quotes) and will
avoid it if they are allowed to; and I have no doubt that those students will be only too happy to have every step explained in detail, to have their research done for them, to have their paper outlined by their instructor and perhaps even typed out. And such a strategy will, no doubt lead to polished papers in the pile on the due date. But I doubt that students are more likely to learn more from the process. The facilitator who wrote this advice has confused product with process; the assumption is that if students hand in a decent paper, they will have learned how to write a decent paper, but that is only true if they are given enough space to actually do it. Real learning will only have happened when students can write independently, when they really can grapple with provocative questions. To assist and guide at every single stage is to rob students of the opportunity of learning to think for themselves.

One of the most effective essay topics I have ever given was four words long. It was on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in particular the character of Hamlet’s mother, Gertrude, who hastily marries her husband’s brother after her husband is murdered by that very brother. Instead of spelling out every issue and question, that is, instead of doing much of the writing for my students, I simply asked the following:

*How guilty is Gertrude?*

By the standards of facilitation, this topic is a disaster. For one thing, what does it mean? Students who chose this topic had a good deal of thinking to do. Guilty of what, for example? Well, Gertrude’s marriage to her dead husband’s brother is termed “incestuous” in the play; is Gertrude guilty of incest? Did she conspire with her new husband to murder her old one? Or if not conspire, was she silently complicit? And how does all this relate to the larger themes of the play? Difficult questions, but that is precisely the point. *Hamlet* is difficult. Easy Shakespeare is not Shakespeare, and I dare say that easy History is not history, and easy Organic Chemistry is not organic chemistry.

I do want to end with an important qualification. I am not trying to argue against the notion of facilitation in every case or in every sense. Nor do I intend any negative judgement on those who primarily think of themselves as facilitators. I think it likely that those who have thought enough about the issue to style themselves that way are probably far better teachers than the average. In a broad sense those university instructors who do not *facilitate* the learning of students are derelict in their duties. Indeed, the word *faculty* itself also derives from *facilis*, easy, and our job as faculty members is to develop the intellectual *faculties* of our students. Still, if we are to help students make the transition from passive learner to vital thinker, we must be careful with the words we use and the assumptions they entail. If we embrace the notion of facilitation too wholeheartedly, if we accept the metaphor uncritically, to use one more variation of *facilis*, we may find our teaching has become *facile*. Let us be facilitators, but let us not forget to be difficilitators too.
Works Cited

7 Principles of Effective Writing Assignments. University Writing Centre, University of California, Chico. 29 October 2004. 
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