

Teachable Moments: A Tool for Improving Learner's Learning in Depth and Breath

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Abstract: Paper attempts to bring the idea of teachable moments to be a serious part of school teaching. Teachable moments are unplanned seized opportunities for teaching important aspects related to learning contents, social and moral concepts. Author highlights why we need to tap teachable moments for the sake of exploring different dimensions of the concepts, personality development, explaining ethical and moral issues, building mental health and concept formation. Paper outlines the process of executing teachable moments in terms of finding a moment, building rapport, understanding learner's point of view, presenting true perspective of the concept, clarifying the approach, evaluating another proposition with same approach and finally adding to his/her experience for further use. Finally paper ends with the characteristics of teacher who can pick up the teachable moments for advantage of learners. Paper ends with some suggestions for a teacher for using teachable moments as a strategy for learning to fullest extent.

Keywords: teachable moments, teaching, learning, ethical issues, intentional teacher

1. Introduction

A student in eighth class while learning a social study lesson on 'basic human values' asks the teacher –do acquiring values will make me rich? Teacher was stunned how comes this? He did not plan this as a possible question during the lesson. He had two options- either declare the question irrelevant or seize the opportunity to teach something very important, which otherwise he could not. He opted for second and asked the learner why he thought like this. Learner responded that possession of all valuable things like gold, diamond etc. is indicator of richness. Teacher took time and explained that value came first and later the valuable things. In philosophical sense anything which is universally good, pure and pious forever is a value. It is the idea replicated for material, which endorse that gold and diamond are valuable among possessions. Basic human values are characteristics possessed by a man which turns him morally rich rather than in material sense. This was a 'teachable moment' should not be missed by a teacher.

According to Beth Lewis' "A teachable moment is an unplanned opportunity that arises in the classroom where a teacher has an ideal chance to offer insight to his or her students. It is not something that you can plan for; rather, it is a fleeting opportunity that must be sensed and seized by the teacher." This will often require a brief departure from the lesson plan in progress, so that the teacher can explain a concept that has inadvertently captured the students' collective interest. Taking this tangent is worthwhile because it is organically timed to maximize impact on the students i.e. why called as 'teachable moment'. After all, the entire curriculum is designed to sharpen our observations and develop critical thinking. This will lead to personality development the ultimate goal of educational process. Teachable moments offer tremendous opportunities for that. A routine teacher may think a question in the class does not pertain to the lesson is meant to distract him, it may be true on some occasion but mostly it has potential to offer wonderful chance to explore hidden curriculum. One of the most important skills to nurture as a teacher is the ability to recognize and capitalize on teachable moments in everyday teaching. A teachable moment can happen almost anywhere- in classroom, in a laboratory, on the play ground, on an educational trip, walking through the corridors or on a table

in cafeteria. Chances are that many of the valuable moral lessons that you learned from your teacher as a child were not consciously taught at all. They were rather learned in the midst of casual moments of school life, living and interacting with others in a hundreds of different ways we could never predict in advance. This is why an important key to teaching children ethical behavior is learning to recognize teachable moments through which children can develop the habit of being aware of ethical challenges. For instance, when on a day due to inclination weather fewer students turned in the class, still you taught as usual, learners have learnt moral lesson of honesty, dutifulness and ethical behavior. A teacher who looks to seize teachable moments is titled as 'Intentional teacher'.

2. An Intentional Teacher and Teachable Moments

- An intentional teacher catches teachable moments and is prepared to use them to his advantage, making every moment count.
- An intentional teacher will teach beyond the textbook, integrating something more into the lesson, which creates teachable moments.
- An intentional teacher cares about her students' growth, not just academically but socially, and uses behavioral issues as another means of teaching a valued lesson. For him it is 'remarks' that matter rather than 'mark'.
- An intentional teacher is involved in educational change and strives to make a difference daily in the lives of her students. (*Outside the box teaching ideas*-<http://www.teachhub.com/intentional-teaching-enjoying-teachable-moments>)

3. Why we need teachable moments:

As we know teachable moments are unplanned moments but the contents of these moments are not unplanned to that extent. A teacher must be aware of the content learners should know at stage of development he is dealing with. He must be very clear about these issues to take a certain position which is based on facts and he remains unbiased. Teacher should catch the teachable moments due to following reasons.

- a) **Teaching the content from different perspectives:** the course content may be delimited in scope due to constrain of time, but teacher feels that there is another dimension which should be explored for complete understanding of the phenomenon. For instance a topic on cloning in biology will be purely technical but there are some ethical issues involved in it which could be explored by the teacher. It can be done in practical classes or finding some time at recess or so.
- b) **For teaching other than course content:** there are number of issues which can't be covered under the course content, but opportunity must be seized to discuss the same. For instance issues like religion, sex, sex abuse, love, fashion, patriotism, drug abuse, drug mafia, human trafficking, disability; marginalization etc. may not directly fall in the social study curriculum but no doubt are social issues. Teacher must look for an opportunity to explain these issues from true perspective. This will save the learners for building myths and false conceptualization.
- c) **For personality development:** only learning contents can't build personality of the learner. In teachable moments we come across issue like values, interest, misconceptions, superstitions, attitudes which are part and parcel of our personality. Teacher should be able to explain difference between values and beliefs, interest and attitude, knowledge and information and the like. He must explain the learners there are philosophical inputs and behavioral outcomes in our learning contents. What is knowledge, what is true knowledge, types of knowledge, how knowledge differ from data, information and wisdom, what are different modes of acquiring knowledge, are some of the subjects teacher can touch to develop personality of the learners.
- d) **For teaching ethics:** the oldest definitions of education declare 'being virtuous is being educated' and virtues are gained through ethical behavior. Ethical behavior is about taking right decision at right time and resolving conflicts on ethical basis. Issues like honesty, duty, service, courteousness, justice are to be seen through ethical lenses. Teacher needs to provide thumb rules and skills for critical analysis to solve ethical issues and dilemma. For these issues teachable moments are in abundance, as students mostly raise questions on ethical issues.
- e) **For mental health:** mental health is one of the most important single factors which determine success in academics as well as social circles. Teacher need to use teachable moments to help learners build clean mental health. Positive self concept, superior habits, refined interests and good company are some of the inputs for good mental health. While teaching health and nutrition in science and physical education teacher should seize opportunity to explore aspects of mental health as well. While teaching culture, social groups, and deviant groups in social study teacher can find an opportunity to teach importance of social system for mental health. Similarly guiding choice to habits and interests can be taken as teachable points for building fair mental health of learners.
- f) **For concept formation:** concept formation is again very important aspect of human existence. If wrong concepts are built, it can destroy the whole approach to decision making. For instance there is difference between freedom fighters and terrorists, science and pseudo science, opposing and disagreeing, willingly and not unwillingly etc. Learners must be taught real meaning of leisure, enjoyment, humanity, duty, honesty, sacrifice and the like.
- Process of executing teachable moments**
- g) **Find a moment:** find a moment which could be recognized as teachable moment. It can be during discussion in the classroom in the form of difference of opinion, contrast observation, exception, similarity, relatedness and the like. It may be a question specially asked by a student in the class. It may be an observation that objects the content taught in the class, it can be a misconception or myth experienced by a student. There can be teachable moments other than classroom and other than in academic disciplines. We may come across these moments in play ground, library, and laboratory or even in the school corridors. Social situations are more fruitful to teach social behaviors, manners, ethics and mental health. Teacher can seize these opportunities when students are aware of his presence or even when they are unaware of it.
- h) **Make rapport:** teachable moments are even more delicate than normal teaching. Many a times in teachable moments we tend to take up very delicate issues like sex, religion, love etc. which requires a secure relation between teacher and learner. This necessitates that first a rapport is to be built, so that learner expresses freely and take the suggestion seriously. Making rapport is more about loosing your designation and behaving like a friend so that sharing takes place at emotional level. Once the rapport is established teacher can bring serious business at focus of discussion.
- i) **Understand the point of view:** at this juncture teacher can ask learner's point of view on the subject of teachable point. In case it is related to subject matter it is not a big problem, but if it is an ethical or bit private issue learner may take some time to open up. Learner is encouraged to detail the issue in his own language, in his own style and in his own mode of expression. Teacher may keep a note of words, frequency of words, type of words used, stress while expressing, and any other peculiar behaviour. Let the learner point out the problems or confusion he faces relating to the issue at hand.
- j) **Present true perspective:** now it is teacher's turn. Teacher need to explain the actual position and the principal behind the perspective. There are some techniques which makes things acceptable. The explanation is base on facts, concrete explanation, verifiable, or presenting events of its feasibility. In case the issue directly belongs to content learning it is definitely substantiated by reference material, but if it is social or moral issue it needs to be dealt comprehensively.
- k) **Clarify the approach:** principle of decision, acceptability or rejection is based on some approach. An approach is actually a philosophical consideration which provides guiding framework for designing a principle. Approaches differ from discipline to discipline and domain to domain. It is much easier to explain an approach in case of well define contents, but much

difficult for behavioral issues. For instance science subjects involve positivism as guiding spirit where as social issues involve constructivism or pragmatism. Positivism is absolutely well defined where as pragmatism and constructivism changes with variation of context and actors.

- l) **Evaluate another proposition:** now asks the child to take another proposition in the same domain or a variation of the same issue to test whether the approach works or not. If it works, issue is settled until objection is met, in case learner finds a contradiction, approach and principle needed to be reassessed. A brain storming is needed; discussion with other teachers or resource persons, consultation of literature will be fruitful to make this teachable moment as a learning point.
- m) **Add to your experience:** if this proves to be a fruitful teachable moment, teacher should note it down as a repertoire of teachable moments. One should remember that teachable moments may be incidental, but explanation or solution are not incidental, these are well thought, experienced and concrete solutions ready for presentation. Teacher knows in advance when learners will be confused or face problems and will be in need, so be ready for teachable moments. In case it is new one, even teacher has something to learn, it should definitely be recorded for further use.

4. Who can pick a teachable moment?

- a) **Sharp sense of seizing the opportunity:** teacher need to be very keen observer for picking the teachable moments. As explained earlier teachable moments can come in the class, outside the class, related to learning contents and behavioral ones and so and so on. An ordinary teacher can think a question or deviant response as irrelevant event where as intentional teacher will take it as teachable moment.
- b) **Well developed affective domain:** feelings are most important for empathy skills. Understanding learner's point of view is very important for understanding the misconception s/he is having or reason of his ignorance. Most of the problems are due to lack of effectiveness of affective domain among students, which could only be rectified if teacher himself has well developed affective domain.
- c) **Resourcefulness:** teacher need to be resourceful for explaining the true perspective of the issue at hand. A resourceful teacher can present facts, events, models etc. to justify the true perspective. Resourceful person has fertile mind that can easily see a potential teaching moment.
- d) **Well read and experienced:** a well read and experienced teacher has gone through similar situations, which could serve as lessons for reuse or to avoid the use. Every teachable moment add to the experience of the teacher which can be used and reused for future moments. Only well read teacher understand that there is something called 'teachable moment' and keeps in mind the events and facts to be presenting during teachable moments.
- e) **Knowledge of philosophical and sociological considerations:** most of the issues to be seen as teachable moments belong to philosophical and sociological domains; a teacher can do the justice only if s/he is well

versed with philosophical and sociological considerations. Every community or group has its own philosophical and sociological interpretation of reality and existence, which must be very clear to the teacher before dealing with the issue.

Finally, here are six key points for teaching morals using teachable moments:

- Recognize that your student often learn moral lessons unconsciously, in casual moments, thus be friendly while teaching morals.
- Be aware of situations that represent moral choices, this will make a ready teachable moment.
- Talk with your students about the ethical challenges represented in everyday situations, media, science, technology, politics, culture and the like.
- Praise your students for their ethical choices; still analyze the right choice for teaching others.
- Point out ethical behavior in others to make a model for ethical choices.
- Let your student see your own thought processes regarding ethical decisions, this will provide them approach to be used for similar situations.

5. Some learning and behavioral terms could be used as teachable moments:

Learning contents can be related to –approach for problem solving, explaining relation between variables, exceptional values, pattern, order, integration, differentiation, application, replication, transformation of concept to new situations and the like. Behavioral contents may involve- decision making, conflict resolution, defining a concept, variations of a concept, wise choice from available options, acceptable and not acceptable social behaviors, morality and related issues, ethics and professionalism, values and virtues, religion and rituals, personality and perceptions and the like.

6. Concluding Remarks

Although we recommend teacher should look for teaching moments, but it can only happen at a common 'space' where teachers and children might achieve what Jerome Bruner has terms a 'meeting of minds' (Bruner, 1996). Such a meeting of minds should involve interaction in cognitive terms at no man's land, which belongs to both teacher and learner leads to Vygotsky's concept of inter-subjectivity (Vygotsky, 1978). This will help the teacher to understand how his learner learns and what he does not and the learner learns prospective of teacher. Once teacher uses good number of teachable moments, both teacher and learner start understanding each other cognitively, socially as well as psychologically. Learners then develop is sense of curiosity and urgency to look for teaching moments as an integral part of teaching-learning strategy. This is the point of convergence between teacher's as well as learners' minds is the real objective of formal teaching.

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