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Fundamental tool in education is communication: professor

By H. Kaji and J. Heirannia

TEHRAN — Professor Eric Thomas Weber believes that "the fundamental tool in education is communication."

"Today our options and avenues for communication are growing tremendously, allowing for new forms of social organization and cooperation," Weber, assistant professor of public policy leadership at the University of Mississippi, told the Mehr News Agency.



WEBER

Following is the text of the interview:

Q: The new academic term will begin in the next weeks. This is a reason for thinking again about the nature of education in our era. Do you think online education can or should replace traditional education or that these two methods can be combined?

A: The fundamental tool in education is communication. Today our options and avenues for communication are growing tremendously, allowing for new forms of social organization and cooperation. One application of these developments is in online education, such as through the use of email, teleconferencing, videoconferencing, and virtual classroom Web sites like BlackBoard. While I am immensely glad about these new developments and see great potential for the benefits that they will enable, I do not think that they bring with them an end to traditional education. This is because the powers of electronic communication do not yet allow the full intricacies and breadth of communicative interaction that personal presence allows. Thus, there will always be some advantages and potential for fruitful interaction in localized education that virtual education cannot quite achieve.

At the same time, I would not want my comments to be understood as an attack on electronically assisted communications and methods for online education. The new tools we have available today allow the interaction of people across enormous distances in a nearly immediate way, which is something we have never before been able to achieve as well as we can now. Also, for the great many people who either live in remote locations or who suffer from debilitating medical conditions, a whole world of educational opportunity is opening up which was never as available as it is today. Not only is the latter development one that expands justice and opportunities for traditionally neglected people, but it also enlarges the pool of talent from which humanity can draw in seeking tomorrow's leaders. Today, persons with terrible physical disabilities can nonetheless be remarkable communicators, workers, and engaged citizens with the help of electronically assisted communications. These developments are reason to cheer on the progress of new methods and avenues for education, while still maintaining equally an appreciation for traditional education where it is possible.

As the philosopher John Lachs has pointed out, the proximity and direct interactions that one receives in traditional colleges and universities cannot be valued highly enough. It is simply a matter of the effects of living among intelligent, caring people who can teach students things and learn from them in the process of working in close proximity. In short, we can at the same time proudly support the development of new educational opportunities and online communication methods, while we also preserving and cherishing the great benefits of traditional, location based educational institutions.

Q: How do you read the text of your disciplines?

A: My primary discipline is philosophy. In that discipline, the works of Plato are some of the most important early texts, even though philosophy has developed in many parts of the world in rich ways. What is so remarkable about Plato and the dialogues of Socrates which Plato wrote and passed down to us is the insight he offered that learning is greatest in dialogue with others. Dialogues need not be immediate today, but in Socrates's day, he feared that people did not take the written word as dynamic and as open to question as we see it today. Thus, when we read philosophy today, we do best to see ourselves as readers having a dialogue with the texts we engage. We must see those texts, furthermore, as open to question, or else we will fail to seek the truth as profoundly as we should.

At the same time, we always must remember that our present circumstances are not always shared with the author we are reading, so our readings must be generous to the author in terms of trying to understand each in his or her context. Nonetheless, our readings are not simply for the sake of knowing what one author said a long time ago, but rather are efforts to gain what we can about knowledge, truth, and ethics so that we may live more justly and more intelligently today.

Q: Do you take notes of some important points of the texts which you read?

A: Yes. It is extremely helpful to note passages to which we wish to return for insight time and again.

Some people take notes about the texts they read with the help of separate notebooks or computer files.

Others sometimes take notes in the margins of the books they read, when they own them. It is important in my experience, however, not simply to note what important points exist in the book, but also what kinds of reactions of my own to the readings are important to remember. For instance, if a passage can be misinterpreted easily, it is important to make note of how it can be misunderstood so that on future readings, I always recall with generosity what the author of the text intended. Plus, given that reading philosophy is an engagement in dialogue with the brilliant minds of the past, readings benefit tremendously from note taking about how one as the reader might respond to the claims and questions of the author whom one is reading.

Q: Do you review those texts?

A: There are different strategies here, since some people read very fast and some very slowly. In general, however, it is almost always the case that multiple readings of philosophical texts repay the reader significantly for his or her efforts. Those people who read quickly especially benefit from multiple readings of texts.

I read philosophy extremely slowly, which I find often allows me to avoid the misinterpretations of texts that require very careful consideration in reading them. That said, there are many texts that I read multiple times. The question here has to do with how much time I have.

In my own experience, if time is limited, which it almost always is, I would much prefer one slow, thorough and careful reading over two very quick readings. The important thing in the end has to do with the care we must take to understand important and complex ideas. Repeating the reading of a text is one of the primary ways we can take such care, but I think as important or sometimes more important is the need for people to read more slowly, making each reading of each text more careful.

Q: Do you hold dialogue with others about those texts for a deeper understanding of the texts?

A: Absolutely. Given that philosophy is richest and most fruitful in dialogue, conversations must not end after reading and engaging authors. They will always be richer if readings are followed with dialogue with others. The university setting is one of the most ideal places for such discussions, but they can occur wherever careful readers find common interests to talk about the same texts or different ones about the same issues. Different readers will nearly always notice things that others have not recognized. Therefore, the value of talking with other readers cannot be overstated. Even if the people with whom one discusses a text have misunderstood it, in fact especially so, one can then help people to learn more accurately what the texts have to offer. So, whether people discussing a text all understand it well or if some understand it poorly, the dialogue can be rich and fruitful for learning. The important thing is that people take as central the task of honest engagement of the text in a process of drawing from it the most important lessons to be learned for seeking the truth and for improving life today.

Eric Thomas Weber is assistant professor of public policy leadership at the University of Mississippi, USA. He has published in human studies, review of policy research, Skepsis, William James Studies, Contemporary Pragmatism, and Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society. He is the author of Rawls, Dewey, and Constructivism (Continuum, 2010). His second book, Morality, Leadership, and Public Policy, will be published in the future.