



PRACTICAL ADVICE

## Meeting the Challenge of a Changing Teaching Environment: Harmonize with the System or Transform the Teacher's Perspective

RICHARD G. TIBERIUS

*University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

**ABSTRACT** *The beliefs that teachers hold about the appropriate roles and responsibilities of teachers shape the ways they teach and the ways they think about teaching. In this paper I describe four teaching roles based on a taxonomy that I've recently developed. Teachers who are guided primarily by the Content Expert Role view themselves as experts who serve as resources, like books or pictures. Teachers who are guided primarily by the Performance Role view themselves as agents who make learning happen by transmitting information or shaping students. Teachers guided primarily by the Interactive Role view themselves as guides who facilitate learning by interacting with learners. And teachers guided primarily by the Relational Role view themselves as engaged in relationships with learners for the purpose of helping them. Using examples taken from the health sciences I explain how each of the four teaching roles might succeed or fail depending upon the position that it occupies within a teaching–learning system. When teaching is viewed as part of a system, not as something a teacher does to a learner, teachers are successful if their particular contribution to the system is essential to the learning system. I also describe the process whereby teachers expand their belief system to include more roles. Such changes in belief systems are major shifts that qualify as “perspective transformations”. Perspective transformations take place slowly and are typically attended by strong emotions. I end this paper with advice to teachers regarding ways they can harmonize with the educational system or face the challenge of perspective transformation.*

**KEYWORDS** *Teacher beliefs, teacher roles, teacher responsibilities, system, teacher transformation, practical advice.*

Address for correspondence: Professor Richard G. Tiberius, PhD, MA, BSc, University of Toronto Faculty of Medicine, Centre for Research in Education, University Health Network, 200 Elizabeth Street, 1 ES 583, Toronto, Ontario M5G 2C4, Canada. Tel: +1 (416) 340 4194. Fax: +1 (416) 340 3792. E-mail: [r.tiberius@utoronto.ca](mailto:r.tiberius@utoronto.ca); <http://cre.med.utoronto.ca>

Role differentiation within health professions practice is understood and accepted. Physical therapists, physicians, and nurses are expected to engage in different professional roles and responsibilities. Yet health science teachers are often expected to perform generically, as if teaching were a single thing. It is not. Recent explorations (Pratt *et al.*, 1998; Bess *et al.*, 2000; Tiberius, 2001) into the nature of teaching have described a broad spectrum of teaching competencies, tasks, roles and responsibilities. Indeed, to continue the analogy with the health professions, the difference between types of teaching is more like the difference between science-based medicine, folk medicine, and faith healing, all focused on health but representing different *competencies* as well as different *belief systems*.

The range of teaching competencies that are required of teachers today is so large that one person cannot master them all. Bess and his colleagues (2000) suggest a team solution in which teachers are matched to tasks that suit their interests and talents. Bess' book brings good news to teachers who are frustrated by the expectation that they must have the skills to be able to teach in any situation—lecture, small group or supervision. The book explains how, by joining collaborative teams, teachers can be successful without having all the needed competencies.

Differences in teachers' beliefs about the roles and responsibilities of teaching have also been subjected to analysis recently. Pratt *et al.* (1998) and Tiberius (2001) explained how teachers' belief systems influence the ways they teach and the ways they think about teaching. The conclusion of these authors, like Bess' conclusion, is also good news for teachers. Teachers can be successful regardless of their beliefs about teaching. However, their success does not lie in organizing complementary teaching teams. Teams composed of teachers with different beliefs would not be complementary in the way that teams of teachers with different skills would be. Rather, success lies in either harmonizing with the educational system or expanding one's role repertory through perspective transformation.

In this paper I will (1) describe four belief systems about teaching and learning (Tiberius, 2001) (see Table 1), (2) identify health science educators who might hold these various belief systems, (3) explain how each teacher's

**Table 1.** Beliefs about teacher roles, from 1945 to 2000\*

- 
1. *The Content Expert Role:* experts who serve as a resource, like a book or a picture, by maintaining expertise in the subject matter.
  2. *The Performance Role:* teachers who make learning happen by transmitting information or shaping students.
  3. *The Interactive Role:* teachers who facilitate learning by *interacting* with the learner.
  4. *The Relational Role:* teachers who use relationships and personal engagement for the purpose of *helping* the learner.
- 

\*Adapted from Tiberius (2001).

success or failure depends upon her or his position within the teaching–learning system, and (4) describe the process whereby teachers expand their belief system to include more roles. I end with advice to teachers.

## The Content Expert Role

Consider for a moment a group of people who make a valued contribution to the educational system but who do not deliberately engage in any teaching. We may hesitate to call them teachers because teaching is by definition a deliberate activity, one whose purpose is facilitating learning, yet they do contribute to learning by serving as *resources to learners*. They believe that their *responsibility* is one of maintaining current knowledge in their field. These are the teachers for whom the *Content Expert Role* (Tiberius, 2001) is dominant.

Who are they? They are a large number of workers in health science centers who have no formal responsibility for teaching, but from whom our students learn. Examples are patients, standardized patients, lab technicians, computer technicians, colleagues, and health care workers from many disciplines and specialties who have no formal teaching responsibilities. We could add to the list another group who do take some responsibility for teaching but whose dominant role is one of resource to the learner. I have in mind the scientists, researchers, and clinicians—certainly not all of them—but those in whose labs and practices our students are mainly observers or “guests”.

### *Harmonizing the Content Role within the Teaching–Learning System*

How do these non-teachers serve learners? Think of teaching not as something a teacher does to a learner but rather as a system of components, each of which supplies an important ingredient to learning. Within such a system, Content Experts are valued contributors to learning if that role is needed. That is, they provide ingredients that are *essential* to the learning system when these ingredients are not available from other sources, such as course readings or lectures, textbooks or any other component of the teaching system. Students can learn from these Content Experts even though the experts have contributed little more than information, presented unsystematically. The students can, that is, if they are active learners—defining their own learning objectives, asking questions, and evaluating their own performances.

### *Perspective Transformation*

Content Experts, who work in a teaching environment like a health sciences educational facility, are likely to face the challenge of becoming more deliberate in their teaching, either from outside pressure or internal motivation. Examples in my experience are standardized patients who take on formal teaching responsibilities, computer specialists who give classes on the use of

courseware, and physicians in clinical placements who begin to develop “scripts” (Irby, 1994) for bringing certain ideas to the attention of students. Such role changes require new skills, but more importantly, they frequently require a shift in the belief system of the resource person. The new belief system will enable them to think of themselves as teachers. Changes in belief systems about teaching are major shifts that Pratt *et al.* (1998) and Mezirow (1981) call perspective transformations. Perspective transformations take place slowly and are typically attended by strong emotions.

## The Performance Role

It is difficult to imagine a teacher who does not engage in performances. Every intentional action aimed at encouraging learning is a teaching performance, from the simplest gesture to the most polished lecture. The *skilled performer* category (Tiberius, 2001), however, is reserved for those teachers who have made performance their central role in teaching and who attribute agency to the performance itself rather than to the interaction between the performance and the learner’s response. They believe that their performances *make learning happen*. While Content Experts do not see themselves as agents of learning, the Performers often see themselves as the *sole* agents of learning. Students are the “products” of their “molding and shaping”.

Who are they? They are typically successful lecturers, praised for their humor, enthusiasm, and their ability to organize and clarify material. They can also be small group leaders who use their skills to “bring out” learning points from their students. They can be one-to-one clinical teachers who can spin out mini lectures at the slightest provocation. They emphasize telling, explaining, and giving feedback rather than listening, understanding and receiving feedback.

### *Harmonizing the Performance Role within the Teaching–Learning System*

The Performers owe their success not just to the quality of their performances themselves but also to the position that these performances fill within the teaching–learning system. Performances are valued if they provide an ingredient that is *essential* to the learning system and that is not available from other sources in the system. Under the appropriate conditions Performers can be valuable to learners even though they do not interact with them beyond answering questions, and do not invest much time in building relationships with them. In our faculty we have a few classic examples of Performers who win awards every year. The word is out that their lectures are not only fun but also are essential to the exam. Although the judges of their teaching awards usually attribute their success to their performances alone, if we examine the system as a whole we find other factors important to their success, such as textbooks that

are difficult to understand (or non-existent) or exams that are based on the lecture material. The debt that these lecturers owe to context became clear when a few of the elements of the system were changed, as they were during curriculum renewal. Since the new curriculum examines students on their own learning objectives, their ability to research their own material, and on their participation in small groups rather than on lecture material, the lectures—those that were still permitted in the new curriculum—often lose their appeal.

### *Perspective Transformation*

In my experience Performers generally have a difficult time expanding their belief system to include Interactive or Relational Roles, even when the latter are required in the new curriculum. In contrast to Content Experts who experience the shift from a non-teaching to a teaching role as growth, Performers frequently experience the shift away from performance and toward interaction as a shift to something less worthy. When one of our award-winning lecturers attended the small group discussion class of his colleague, he was shocked by what he called her lack of preparation. I assured him that his colleague was well prepared for her seminar but that it was a different kind of preparation from his. Then, with a smile, I told him “When you facilitate a discussion that may move in unpredictable directions, you need to know the subject matter from many different points of view so that you will be able to make an appropriate intervention no matter what the turn of the discussion”. His colleague’s award and validation by an educational consultant will make it difficult for him to pass her off as incompetent. If he reflects on these experiences, perhaps aided by reading about Interactive teaching, he may begin to think about the learning experience from the learner’s point of view, a step toward the transformation that would enable him to accept a more Interactive role.

## **The Interactive Role**

Teachers whose dominant teaching role is what I have called the *Interactive Role* (Tiberius, 2001) view themselves as *interacting* with students for the purpose of *facilitating* learning. They believe that their responsibility is to find out about their learners so that teaching interventions can be targeted to specific learning needs. They hold the constructivist view that teaching is a process of facilitating connections between a subject matter and an active, growing mind, and the best way to find out about that mind is to interact with it. Therefore teaching, for them, is *inherently* interactive.

Typically we associate Interactive teachers with small group teaching because that format demands interaction. But Interactive teachers can also be found lecturing or teaching one-to-one. What distinguishes Interactive teachers is their belief that the quality of their teaching performance is inherent, not in

the performance, but in the interaction between the performance and the student's response. The lecturer, like the one described above, who invites me to visit his class and give him feedback on his teaching, is usually a Performer. The lecturer who invites me to talk to her students to gather feedback on her teaching is usually an Interactive teacher.

### *Harmonizing the Interactive Role within the Teaching–Learning System*

Interaction will be valued if it provides an ingredient that is essential to the learning system and that is not available from other sources in the system. Students are rarely so self-directed that they stride confidently through the curriculum as if it were a cafeteria, choosing those items that are best suited to their learning agendas and personal growth. They often need help in defining their learning agendas. As the saying goes, “Students do not know what they do not know”. They also need help defining the resources and means of evaluating their learning success. Most students need more than a menu. They need a waiter who will interpret the menu in the students' language. They need someone who will listen to them, and guide them through their educational journey.

Interactive teachers appear to be independent of the teaching–learning system because they are so accommodating. That is, their interaction with students enables them to track student needs and respond to them despite changing elements of the system. So, for example, Interactive teachers are able to accommodate changes in the textbook, the exam, or even in the background of the students. However, the effectiveness of their interaction is dependent on other factors, principally the quality of their relationship with the learners. Effective interaction requires at least some cooperation, truthfulness, and willingness to negotiate (Tiberius & Billson, 1991). Competitiveness, abusiveness, or a lack of trust will reduce the usefulness of interactions in teaching.

### *Perspective Transformation*

In my experience Interactive teachers have a difficult time expanding their belief system to include a Relational Role for the same reasons that Performers have difficulty shifting to Relational Roles. The shift is often perceived negatively. Some teachers are unable to accept “relationship enhancement” as a legitimate objective of teaching. When I suggested to one teacher that her teaching problem might lie in her relationships with students she reacted as though I had just told her that I was unable to find out anything. She reminded me that she was teaching a class not convening a social occasion. She asked me if I would have raised the issue of relationships if she were a man. I felt myself backing down, quickly. It appeared that her belief system did not include “building a relationship with students” among its teaching roles.

However, as relationship issues keep arising in her classes, eventually she may inquire about how other colleagues handle them. She may read about the social context of teaching. She may listen to the students' points of view and

reflect on her perceptions. All of these influences will likely exert pressure on her belief system, perhaps leading to transformation of her beliefs about the appropriate role of the teacher.

## The Relational Role

The Relational Role is usually acquired late in a teacher's development, after the content has been mastered and teaching performances perfected (e.g. Sherman *et al.*, 1987; Pratt, 1989; Boice, 1992). Teachers assume a Relational Role when they discover that their students are persons and that the effectiveness of their presentations is dependent upon the quality of their relationships with learners. They have a striking similarity to Content Experts in that they may not consider themselves teachers at all, since the dominant metaphor of teaching today is performance (Tiberius, 1986). Their major *responsibility* is building alliances—authentic, trusting relationships—with their students. They believe that the teacher–student relationship is the primary vehicle for learning.

Who are they? Clinical teachers are highly represented in the group of teachers whose dominant teaching role is the *Relationship Enhancement Role* (Tiberius, 2001). One of our senior clinical teachers springs to mind. He once told me that he does not do any teaching. “Of course”, he added, “I supervise and mentor residents”. To him the word “teaching” meant lecturing or leading small groups. His beliefs about teaching did not include the very kind of teaching that he did! Yet he has won teaching awards. Residents trust him and consult with him regularly for advice and referrals.

*Harmonizing the Relational Role within the Teaching–Learning System*  
A strong alliance between teachers and students improves the teaching effectiveness of their interaction (Tiberius & Billson, 1991). Desirable qualities of supervisors include empathy, focusing on the affective concerns of the learners and tracking the students' emotional agendas and their learning issues (Shanfield *et al.*, 1992). The mentor role, which goes beyond supervision in its deeper responsibility for the development of the students, is superbly suited to clinical education, which is a cognitive apprenticeship (Brown *et al.*, 1989). The mentor introduces trainees to the culture of the practice as well as to needed knowledge and skills. Outside of health sciences education the Relationship Role is common among supervisors of graduate students.

I have had the honor of teaching some of these senior supervisors and mentors in my workshops on small group teaching and lecturing. Their lack of confidence is always surprising. Although they are experienced mentors they appear like new faculty learning about teaching for the first time. What they are actually learning is a new teaching role, one that had previously been fulfilled by other components of the system.

### *Perspective Transformation*

Relational teachers often face the same kind of challenge as Content Experts regarding expansion of their belief systems. The role changes that they face certainly require new skills, but they also require a transformation in their belief systems, one that will enable them to think of themselves as teachers in the conventional sense.

## **Summary and Suggestions**

In this paper I've identified four types of teachers, each holding different beliefs regarding the roles, responsibilities and relationships appropriate to teaching.

### *Practical Advice Regarding Appreciation of the Teacher's Role within the Teaching – Learning System*

1. Adopt a broader perspective on teaching, one that views teaching as part of a system of influences on the learner rather than as an activity carried out by a single teacher. This perspective enables teachers and administrators to strike collaborative arrangements in which each contributor can be valued. No individual teacher has to meet *all* of the conditions necessary for learning to occur. Each of us can succeed by fulfilling a single role, which is a component of a successful teaching – learning system, assuming that other components of the system (other teachers, textbooks, computer programs, student interaction, etc.) can supply the ingredients that we do not supply.
2. Use the literature. Teachers, administrators and educational consultants benefit from knowledge of the writings that describe different perspectives of teaching (Pratt *et al.*, 1998; Robertson, 1999b; Tiberius, 2001) and writings that describe ways of affecting useful matches between teacher characteristics and teaching demands (Bess *et al.*, 2000).
3. If possible, consult an expert. Conversations with an educational consultant can help teachers gain self-awareness of their own role and of the larger system within which they function.
4. Find out what others are doing. A awareness of your position in the system can be gained from comparisons with colleagues and what they do.

### *Practical Advice Regarding Perspective Transformation*

1. Be encouraged. Role flexibility may be uncomfortable but it is a good thing. Role flexibility is increased when teachers expand their beliefs about roles, responsibilities and relationships. Teachers who have greater flexibility can contribute usefully to a larger number of teaching situations without having to adjust the system.

2. Recognize that a feeling of failure, a feeling that more of the same—more skills, more interaction, more sensitivity—is not working may be an opportunity for transformation rather than a sign that you are burning out.
3. Reflect on your teaching. Donald Schön's books (1983, 1987) on teaching improvement through reflection are useful.
4. Do not underestimate the magnitude of the task of transforming your belief system. It is emotionally taxing. Mezirow (1981), Robertson (1996, 1999a), and Pratt *et al.* (1998) are helpful resources.

## References

- BESS, J. *et al.* (2000). *Teaching alone, teaching together: transforming the structure of teams for teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey–Bass.
- BOICE, R. (1992). *The new faculty member: supporting and fostering professional development*. San Francisco: Jossey–Bass.
- BROWN, J.S., COLLINS, A. & DUGUID, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher*, 1, 32–42.
- IRBY, D.M. (1994). What clinical teachers in medicine need to know. *Academic Medicine*, 69, 333–342.
- MEZIROW, J. (1981). A critical theory of adult learning and education. *Adult Education*, 32(2), 3–27.
- PRATT, D.D. (1989). Three stages of teacher competence: a developmental perspective. In: E.R. Hayes (Ed.), *Effective teaching styles: new directions for continuing education*, no 43. San Francisco: Jossey–Bass.
- PRATT, D.D. *et al.* (1998). *Five perspectives on teaching in adult and higher education*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- ROBERTSON, D.L. (1996). Facilitating transformative learning: attending to the dynamics of the educational helping relationship. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 47, pp. 43–53.
- ROBERTSON, D.L. (1999a). Unconscious displacements in college teacher and student relationships: conceptualizing, identifying, and managing transference. *Innovative Higher Education*, 23, 151–169.
- ROBERTSON, D.L. (1999b). Professional perspectives on their teaching: a new construct and developmental model. *Innovative Higher Education*, 23, 271–294.
- SCHÖN, D.A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.
- SCHÖN, D.A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey–Bass.
- SHANFIELD, S.B., MOHL, P.C., MATTHEWS, K.L. & HETHERLY, V. (1992). Quantitative assessment of the behavior of psychotherapy supervisors. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 149, 352–357.
- SHERMAN, T.M., ARMISTEAD, L.P., FOWLER, F., BARKSDALE, M.A. & REIF, G. (1987). The quest for excellence in university teaching. *Journal of Higher Education*, 48, 66–84.

- TIBERIUS, R.G. (1986). Metaphors underlying the improvement of teaching and learning. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 2, 144–156.
- TIBERIUS, R.G. (2001). A brief history of educational development: implications for teachers and developers. In: *To improve the academy*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.
- TIBERIUS, R.G. & BILLSON, J.M. (1991). The social context of teaching and learning. In: R.J. MENGES & M. SVINICKI (Eds) *College teaching: from theory to practice: new directions for teaching and learning number 45*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.