

Exemplary teaching: some possibilities for renovating and stimulating didactic practice

C. J. VAN DYK

Exemplary teaching is directed to the essences of a lesson theme and provides possibilities for successfully implementing the essential conditions for educative and formative tasks. A particular example is not chosen to serve as a first learning step but because the essence of a greater whole is reflected in it. This gives teaching a depth where originality is pursued at the expense of completeness. In practice the aim is to use a particular example to give pupils the opportunity to experience the *essence* of a matter or phenomenon. Exemplary teaching does not force the learner to master vast quantities of factual knowledge. As a fundamental didactic form it presents a solution to rigidity in teaching, as well as to the problem of overburdening the pupil.

Keywords: didactic practice; form and content; forming (Bildung) reduction to essences (elementals).

Translator's introduction

The late Cornelius Johannes van Dyk, Professor of Didactic Pedagogics and Subject Didactics at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, was a member of the 'Pretoria school of pedagogical thought', that thrived from the mid-1960s through the mid-1990s. This phenomenologically-oriented group was significantly informed by the Dutch 'Utrecht school' of M. J. Langeveld (Langeveld 1967, 1968, 1983; see also Nel 1973) and by the German 'formative' theory (*Bildungslehre*) of scholars such as Josef Derbolav, Wolfgang Klafki, Theodor Litt, Herman Nohl, Heinrich Roth, Eduard Spranger, Martin Wagenschein, and Erich Weniger. However, the work of the Pretoria group was not a mere adoption and application of these influences. In fact, for reasons beyond the scope of this introduction, the Pretoria school managed for the first time ever (in my view) to establish a unified view of the phenomenon of educating a child in which the philosophical, psychological, and teaching aspects, among others, all are rooted in the educative situation of guiding a child to adulthood, all subscribe to a common philosophical anthropology, and all of their disclosed categories express the essences of the educative reality and mutually complement and confirm each other.

In reading the following translation, it is necessary to keep in mind that 'pedagogic' refers to educating as forming a child for adulthood and 'didactic'

From C. J. van Dyk (1970) Eksemplariese onderwys: enkele moontlikhede vir vernuwing en bevrugting van die didaktiese praktyk. *Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir die Pedagogiek/South African Journal of Pedagogy*, 4 (1), 44–51. The essay was translated by George D. Yonge, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of California at Davis. The translation is presented with the permission of the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria.

refers to teaching. Hence, ‘didactic pedagogic’ refers to the teaching that occurs in an educative situation.

To fully appreciate its profound significance, exemplary teaching has to be viewed within the context of both the theory of categorical forming or double unlocking and the theory of the elemental and the fundamental. (See Klafki (1964), Van Dyk (1973), Kruger (1975), and Van der Stoep and Louw (1984); more accessible references are Hopmann (2000), Klafki (2000a, b), Künzli (2000), Wagenschein (2000a, b), and Derbolav (2003).) The theory of categorical forming assumes that the content involved in forming is directly related to reality and that this reality consists of coherences of aspects or categories such as the social, geographic, historical, religious, physical, etc. In its own way each category provides access to the lived world, or reality, and, thus, reality is viewed as having a categorical structure. Formative teaching occurs only if the different categories are presented as content. However, accessing these categories is not a self-evident process. A teacher has to sift through a category and separate its essentials from non-essentials. This is a *reduction of a category to its essentials* or *elementals*. As formative *content*, this reduction to elementals by the *teacher* unlocks the category and makes it and its related aspects accessible to a *learner*. However, the learner must be ready and willing to open or unlock himself or herself to this essential content. Here there is a harmoniously balanced content–teacher–learner triangle, and the so-called ‘double unlocking’ of categorical forming refers to the teacher unlocking (by reducing) a category of reality for a learner while the learner unlocks himself or herself to the formative content by giving meaning to it and making it his or her own by learning it.

From the above, the theory of the elemental and fundamental is an integral part of the theory of categorical forming (Klafki 1964, Kruger 1975). As an approach to teaching this theory requires that the content to be taught be *reduced to its essences* or elementals so the learner can gain insight into the crux of the matter. An elemental is a basic insight into a certain aspect or category of reality, such as ‘gravity’ (natural science), ‘quantity’ (arithmetic), ‘power’ (political science). When an elemental is learned and made a functional part of the learners’ way of relating to reality there is reference to an elemental having become a *fundamental*. The main thrust of educative teaching is to help the learner transform an elemental into a fundamental. In *Die Lesstructuur* [The lesson structure], Van der Stoep *et al.* (1973) consider designing lessons such that the learners can transform the content from an elemental into a fundamental. Clearly a fundamental involves much more than factual knowledge; it has to do with a change in the learners’ ways of existing or being-in-the-world.

Teaching by example is a powerful way of parsimoniously and effectively presenting content that has been *reduced to its essence* and whose essence is accessible via the example. Obviously, not just any example will do. Examples are more and less successful depending on how clearly they allow the essence of the matter to be perceived or experienced. As Van der Stoep and Louw (1979: 343) say, ‘Each chosen exemplar must carefully be judged to determine if the elementals of a matter, problem, view or law can be presented by it *according to the real essentials of the matter*’ (my translation).

The core activity required of a teacher in order to be involved in categorical forming in terms of elementals and fundamentals by means of the example as a fundamental form of teaching is first to *reduce the content to its essences* in light of his or her teaching aim.

Finally, at this point there might be a temptation to try to limit the form of teaching to the example at the expense of the other fundamental forms of teaching—play, conversation, and assignment. If this were even possible, which it isn't, it would severely restrict and limit the range of teaching possibilities open to a teacher.

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George D. Yonge

This essay attempts to distinguish and describe some of the essential characteristics of the exemplary as a form of teaching as well as to show how its accountable implementation can renovate and stimulate the practice of teaching.

The contemporary literature on the exemplary, especially the German literature, immediately gives one the impression that this is a magnificent idea or thought of special significance and fruitfulness. Exemplary teaching was born in the early 1950s out of the state of emergency that had arisen in Germany. The Tübingen Congress was convened with the sole aim of searching for a possible extrication from the crisis caused by the increasing explosion of learning material. Especially on the basis of the contributions of the physicist Martin Wagenschein and the historian Hermann Heimpel, the significance and possibilities of this revolutionary idea were immediately recognized. The consequence was that this idea gained momentum throughout the continent. Because exemplary teaching directs itself to the core or essence of a topic it offers possibilities for allowing the essences of educative and formative work to correctly occur, but it also frees the teacher from many burdens. One thinks here of actual matters such as where obsolete and pedagogically ingrained methods are mechanically followed and applied recipe-like, the still-increasing deluge of learning material, greater and earlier specialization, excessive rationalizing, the logically exhaustive or even chronological ordering of learning material according to a previously planned (linear) principle.

Viewed superficially, the exemplary is a primitive, age-old form where one starts with an example in order to infer a rule or a law. However, the real significance and difference here is that each distinct example is not selected to serve as the first stage of learning, or as the platform by which there can be progress to the learning aim, but because the essence of the matter or phenomenon, the general, already is observable in the particular example.

Where today's reality is too great merely to be presented to the pupil completely and without gaps, the exemplary refers to the possibility that the teacher is entitled rather to strive for originality, and this certainly justifies a selection of valid and generally representative structures. At the same time this gives depth to the teaching event.

Since it is not possible from the existing literature to arrive at an unambiguous description of the exemplary, for a closer investigation and analysis there must be a return to the original situation where teaching and learning occur in spontaneous and natural ways. Thus, when there is a search for the 'didactic' of didactic pedagogics as it manifests itself in the spontaneous interventions of persons with reality, it is conspicuous that this does not primarily involve formative content itself, as is proclaimed by most didacticians. Rather, the content first comes into play when the form of a practice

is called forth. The important revelation here is the fundamental insight that, in the original experience of educating, it is the form that discloses the content. Therefore, it is the task of didactics to search for form-structures and describe them for practice in order to renovate and stimulate that practice. As soon as learning persons recognize the form as an everyday form of living on the basis of their earlier experiences with it, teaching becomes a meaningful event. Outside of this spontaneous attribution of meaning, reality does not have full meaning for a performing (constituting) consciousness.

By now it is clear that the form as well as the content contribute to arousing intentionality. Because there is an inclination to emphasize the content in planning and designing a lesson situation, we now look at how this relationship appears there.

The relationship between form and content

In most of the literature the formative quality of the learning content that is selected and offered is taken as the first aim. It is asserted that the appeal of the learning content itself, and the wondering that this compels of pupils, is directly related to their awakened liveliness and readiness to search for a solution to any questions that subsequently might arise. For those who hold such a view, the point of departure of exemplary teaching is in stating an actual problem that calls pupils to self-activity and thinking. For them, intentionality is awakened because the matter or phenomenon appeals to consciousness in an implicit sense. Consequently, the pupils will wonder about a gorgeous flower, or be astonished about the size of a lion's skull held before them as an example. Here the aim is mastery of the content for the sake of the inherent value of the content itself. However, at the same time, one cannot neglect to allow for the opportunity to make conscious the appearance of a recognized form of living (in an explicit sense). In exemplary teaching the motivation and enlivenment are not only in the appeal of a particular example, itself, but also in the significance of the particular content for unlocking a broader, general concept. Consequently, it is the task of didactics to search for original structures (forms of living) and to disclose them for practice.

Educating and teaching, as life practices, existed long before there was any mention of schools and formal educational institutions; indeed, from the beginning, adults teach educatively, but they only do this in situations where they intervene with non-adults who will learn. Through teaching it is possible for non-adults to come closer to reality and increasingly become aware of it. Essentially, the situation, and not only the content, now directs an appeal to them. A person's intentionality supports his or her acts of consciousness. This implies that the adult, as initiator and planner of a particular didactic situation, must be primarily directed to awakening the pupil's performing consciousness. Subsequently, there must be a striving to bring about near-to-reality and spontaneous experiences of the original reality; the point of departure cannot support only intellectual views and precise perceptions. Therefore, searching that is limited to formative content and authentic learning results as factualities can no longer be sustained. The

important truth is that it is the form that pushes the content to the fore and must continually be taken into account. Thus, the activity of teaching can never be detached from its form-structure.

This relation between form and content comes clearly to the fore in everyday conversations. A few examples are:

- What *form* does the social function assume?
- Can you give a general *description* of your visit?
- Can you *tell* me a story?
- What are we going to *play*?

In all of these ideas, forms of living are included with the aim that they will be familiar to other persons and will motivate them. It is appropriate now to provide a closer view of the exemplary (example) as a form of living.

The example as a form of living

Didactics, as a theory of a practice, can only arrive at generally valid findings and judgements if its focal point is shifted from the secondary situation, namely the school, to the primary situation, the spontaneous life world. In the everyday activities of persons, certain forms are exhibited out of which their involvement in the surrounding world are crystallized. Hence, in order to try to bring about a possible harmony between theory and practice, each of the many diverse variants, or modes, of the example must be closely viewed so that it becomes possible to distinguish its essential characteristics.

An investigation of the variants of the example show that, irrespective of the mosaic of its forms of expression, such as the paradigm, exemplar, type, model, specimen, pure case, typical case, etc., there is a commonality in the structure that each shows. The form or structure is in their manifesting a particular relationship-concept, namely that the essence of a general concept or greater unity can be ‘taken out’ of the particular. The root word *exemplum*, when carried back to the verb ‘*eximere*’, means to ‘lift out’ or ‘to take out’. This form is universal and remains unchanged in each sphere of life. As a form of living the example manifests itself in courts of law, the church, the military, in history, in politics, and even in trade and industry.

Forms of expression of the example as forms of living

To be able to give a summary of a number of the most primary forms of expression of the example as forms of living, first we must return to the original life world of humans, and to specimens, species, exemplars, models, likenesses, types, displays, exhibitions, compilations, performances, exhibition matches, advertisements, demonstrations, fashion shows, research, prospecting, expeditions, determining grades, and comparing. For greater clarity, we describe a few forms more fully.

- *The specimen.* Today it is generally the practice of most businesses to display a new product to the wider public by means of a free specimen.

Because each specimen must show the same quality, as an example, they are substitutable and inter-changeable. The characteristics of the particular specimen correspond precisely with those of the product in general.

- *The likeness.* In terms of a likeness, the essences of an abstract and general concept are elucidated in remarkably successful ways by means of a simple, everyday concrete example such as a grain of wheat.
- *The type-concept.* Every day we read in the newspaper about law reports in which the lawyer for the defence pleads for extenuating circumstances on the basis that the case against his or her client corresponds to an earlier trial. He expects that the judge will see the relationship among the individual cases and, thus, render his or her verdict on the basis of a *general type* of violation. Although the two court cases can and will differ greatly regarding finer details, still there is a high correspondence between their most important characteristics. Hence, the individual cases can be classified as examples of a general type. They show a typical form.

This brings us to the following section in which the sense and meaning of the example, as a fundamental didactic form and its possibilities for implementation, are explicated.

The example as a fundamental didactic form

What has been described so far as what occurs and can be experienced in the original event as accidental and intuitive now must be turned into polished, purposive, and refined essential characteristics of a particular fundamental form. Only when the form of living is recast and changed into a teaching form does it acquire sense and meaning for implementation in planned, secondary lesson structures. Only when the didactician has, out of the form of living, disclosed the truth of the fundamental form, itself, will he or she be in a position to meaningfully plan his or her presentation and bring about a harmony between theory and practice.

There is the danger that the learning person no longer can recognize, in its new garb, the original form of living that awakens spontaneous enlivenment and impetus. Consequently, it is the task of each teacher to plan beforehand in what ways such fruitful learning moments can be optimally exploited. His or her preparation must provide for intervening and guiding when such pregnant situations surface, so that the child's performing consciousness can be stimulated by explicitly giving meaning (by recognizing forms). Hence, teaching the pupils also must include opportunities in which they learn to recognize and evaluate these fundamental didactic forms and their variations. Then the announcement of the fundamental didactic form at the beginning of a lesson acquires particular significance and meaningfulness. Instead of the traditional announcement of the topic or theme (content) at the beginning of a lesson, now a fundamental didactic form is announced. Becoming aware of a fundamental form contributes to awakening the child's interest and

learning intention and eliminates the danger that the pupil can have a doubt about the learning form, the mode, or way of learning that is to follow. The announcement can be as follows: The aim of our lesson this morning is that you, by independently *experimenting*, must search for a solution to the following problem...

For the pupil, 'experimenting' is already a familiar form of living that usually is used in situations where there is independent work with all kinds of equipment, individually or in groups. However, the problem should never merely be 'handed over' to the pupils. An authentic statement of a problem can only be realized and linked up with the pupil's foreknowledge by the good judgement and skill of the teacher or by means of a stimulating teaching aid.

Here, in a supplementary way, we only mention the most primary objections to a traditional introduction:

- The announcement of the theme at the beginning of a period necessarily means that the pupils are going to listen to a number of 'not yet meaningful' words and concepts and, consequently, will be discouraged rather than encouraged. For example: 'Our lesson for today deals with Chi-square'.
- Formulating the topic of a lesson usually means that it already includes the solution to a particular problem. For example: 'This morning we are going to try to "show" that oxygen is a sustainer of combustion'. Consequently, the problem as well as the solution is known and the only aim of such a lesson is to indicate the truth of the hypothesis.

With exemplary teaching there is a striving to bring about spontaneous enlivenment and, therefore, we cannot scare the child by announcing difficult and not yet meaningful content at the beginning of the lesson.

However, there still is the danger that one easily can lapse into a recipe or scheme, or that the example, as a fundamental didactic form, can be misinterpreted. An exemplary form of teaching can never degenerate into a teaching form in which the solution to a problem is sought simply by increasing the number of examples. In practice, the aim is to use a particular example only to give the pupils the opportunity to acquire an original experience of the *essence* of the matter or phenomenon. As soon as the pupil succeeds in discovering this essence from one or more examples, they must be given further opportunity to apply it. Exemplary teaching does not force the pupil to master great quantities of factual knowledge.

From the above, it is clear why the German didacticians grasped onto the idea of the exemplary so eagerly. For them, in the exemplary fundamental form, there is a solution to the post-war rigidity in teaching, but also a way to help alleviate the state of emergency arising from over-burdening pupils with material to be learned.