Back to Basics: A Six-step Process to Effective Teaching

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Introduction
The term “back to basics” has many meanings in education, and it is best to start by clearing the confusion. In some countries, it means school reform (Holt, 1996), that is, going back to teaching and learning basic reading, writing, and math. A second meaning is to focus on basic (essential) courses so that students do not graduate from school by taking only “soft” elective courses (Lipsett, 2009). A third meaning, which is often found in the teaching of languages, is the debate between learning by immersion and learning by drills. In the teaching of math, one finds a similar disagreement between “conceptual” learning and drills (Xin, 2012). A fourth meaning, according to Dewey (2012), is the basic question on the goals of education.

In this paper, the term “back to basics” means understanding that teaching is, ultimately, about effective communication.

A Six-step Process
So how does one communicate effectively to students, and therefore motivate them to learn? I suggest a six-step process that begins with a framework that structures the way teaching is perceived. Within this environment, the teacher must have positive traits, a clear understanding of the goals, develop a focused curriculum, have a good understanding of how the material is taught, and be committed to continuous improvement in these areas (see Figure 1).
receiving teachers require students to have good background knowledge. Finally, students are a heterogeneous lot with diverse goals. Through surveys over the years, I have found that students generally look for delight, usable knowledge, and “understandable-ness” or clarity. The obverse is that they do not want to be taught impractical theories, nor do they want to attend uninspiring and disorganised classes.

From these basic observations, I figured out that my goal for teaching is to provide a strong foundation that will motivate students or spark enthusiasm for lifelong learning, application, and innovation. In my experience, it is not too difficult to spark enthusiasm if the theories being taught are highly applicable, especially in differing multi-disciplinary contexts. The main difficulty is to build on that strong foundation, which is discussed in the next section.

**Content**

Good curriculum designers know how to write the syllabus in such a way that it allows the teacher some room for interpretation, innovation, and improvement. In my view, the right path is to focus on the core content and leave out the peripherals.

**About the Author**

**Assoc Prof Willie Tan** teaches Research Methods, Development Finance, and Green Development. He believes student motivation lies at the heart of good teaching, and it can be achieved by starting with the big picture, clarity of exposition, providing useful knowledge, and developing strong foundations.
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How To Teach It

The next step is to figure out how to teach it. In my classes, I use a “conceptual map” to let students see the big picture on how the various parts (e.g. lectures and tutorials) are related. Then I make each part as understandable as possible. Two mechanisms are used: first, I go through the instructional steps and iterate until the content is crystal clear. Second, I try to find the best examples. These two mechanisms are by no means easy to implement; it requires “research”, if by that term we mean looking and relooking at it for a better solution.

Continuous Improvement

Finally, one has to look for ways to continuously improve the above steps (see Figure 1). This also requires self-development, whether its experimenting with or being open to new pedagogies and technologies. It involves spending time to “sharpen the axe” and chop more trees with less effort. Abraham Lincoln said that, given six hours to chop down a tree, he would spend the first four sharpening the axe. In my experience when it comes to effective teaching, this proportion is about right.

Endnote

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References


