

Socrates on Teacher Training

Setting: deck of cruise ship en route to the Mediterranean

Characters: Socrates and Donald Dickerman, Executive of an organization that accredits teacher-training institutions

Socrates: As I understand it, not all college teacher-training programs are accredited. How does that work?

Dickerman: It's complicated and sloppy at best. First of all, only five states require teacher-training institutions to be accredited by an agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Some of the other universities choose to have their teacher-training programs accredited, but some choose not to. Until 2003 the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education was the only one recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Now the feds recognize another agency, The Teacher Education Accreditation Council, which in my opinion is a sham.

Socrates: Why is that?

Dickerman: It permits colleges of education to set their own goals.

Socrates: And why do you see that provision as the problem?

Dickerman: Because most universities don't need to have accreditation for teacher training to make up their own goals. The university could simply drop the accreditation for the teacher-training program and run the program under the university's accreditation agency.

Socrates: As I understand it, not all accrediting agencies are recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

Dickerman: I'll say. There are over a hundred accreditation agencies that are not recognized. Some of them have impressive sounding names, like International Commission for Higher Education, World Association of Universities and Colleges, and Accrediting Council for Colleges and Schools.

Socrates: Is the main reason for being accredited that accredited programs are able to receive federal student loans and other financial assistance that are not available to non-accredited institutions?

Dickerman: Certainly that's a motivating factor, but most universities consider the main reason to be the assurance that the teacher-training program meets rigorous standards.

Socrates: And you believe that the programs you endorse deserve their accreditation and meet rigorous standards?

Dickerman: Yes, I do.

Socrates: Do people ask you why teachers are not better prepared by their college training?

Dickerman: Oh yes. We hear it and read about it all the time.

Socrates: How do you respond?

Dickerman: It depends on which aspects of training they are referring to. For instance, we work with a couple of institutions that complain about the lack of knowledge that high school math and physics teachers have. Their position is that the teachers should learn more math or physics before they enter the teacher-training program. Some other people we work with are complaining that our standards are too high and that much of the math and physics we require for high school teachers involves content that is not offered in many high schools. Also, most of them would never choose to teach mathematics.

Socrates: Let's focus only on the elementary schools. The central question I have for you is this: Why don't you limit your accreditation to institutions that use a scientific model for teaching teachers?

Dickerman: I don't know what model you're referring to.

Socrates: It's straight forward. You identify the skills that superior teachers have. You assess incoming students to determine the extent to which they have these skills. Then you set up the teacher-training program so it systematically teaches all the needed skills. Finally, you test graduating students to document that they have the various skills needed to be a superior teacher. Why don't you use that model for determining whether colleges of education are to be accredited?

Dickerman: I'm not sure I know where to begin to answer that question.

Socrates: Possibly the first step is to judge the soundness of the model. What do you think of the strategy of identifying what teachers need to be superior teachers, then systematically teaching those skills, then documenting that the skills have been mastered by the time they graduate?

Dickerman: We don't use those terms, but that's what the teacher-training program is designed to do.

Socrates: If that's the case, you should be able to give me at least a broad outline of the skills and knowledge that incoming students don't have but that superior teachers of at-risk children in elementary schools do have.

Dickerman: Indeed. The Incoming students haven't learned how to meet the children's instructional needs, or how to achieve educational justice. They haven't learned about the importance of parental support, how school functions interact with community, and the need for managing the children while meeting their emotional needs.

Socrates: Those are interesting words, but if graduates of institutions you have accredited are not proficient at teaching at-risk students effectively, there seems to be a serious contradiction somewhere. Specifically, the first-year teacher in an at-risk school typically lacks management skills, and management is one of the recurring in-service agenda items in school districts. How do you explain the fact that most graduates lack management skills?

Dickerman: Well, I'm not sure they do.

Socrates: But are you sure they don't lack these skills?

Dickerman: Personally, I think there's a range of individual differences, but on the whole, I believe that the average graduate does have a sufficient base in these skills?

Socrates: And what is your evidence base for drawing this conclusion?

Dickerman: Well, we're in touch with quite a few school districts, and they give us reports about the performance of our graduates.

Socrates: And what is your evidence that the reports correspond closely to the facts?

Dickerman: I don't have any reason not to believe the reports.

Socrates: Again, that's not relevant. What would be relevant is data that supports the accuracy of the report. Let's look at it a different way. Say you visited at-risk classrooms and observed the new teachers. How would those observations correlate with the reports you receive?

Dickerman: Well, I ... I don't know, but I think they would correspond to what the reports indicate.

Socrates: Have you ever done systematic classroom observations?

Dickerman: No, but I'm told ...

Socrates: Has your organization hired teachers whose students achieve superior performance to observe in classrooms and report specifically on the proficiency of new teachers' management skills?

Dickerman: Well, not really, but ...

Socrates: Which would give you better information, the reports of administrators you contact or those of a superior teacher who has firsthand knowledge of how to manage and who has performed systematic classroom observations?

Dickerman: I see your point, but I hesitate to conclude on the basis of a single person's observations.

Socrates: Good point. It suggests that you might need several superior teachers to observe independently, and report their findings.

Dickerman: That sounds reasonable, but I think it may be beyond the scope of our role. We don't have money for such functions. Possibly the college should perform it.

Socrates: Would you say an organization that accredits institutions is like Consumer Reports, in that both organizations pass judgment on the effectiveness of something?

Dickerman: Yes, in that sense. But our goal is not to rank institutions, simply judge that their practices are sound.

Socrates: Could you imagine a consumer-reporting outfit that did not test products or services, but rather accepted anecdotal reports of unknown validity?

Dickerman: Not really.

Socrates: Well if you can appreciate what a sham such a consumer report could be, wouldn't it follow that your accrediting procedures could be as absurd?

Dickerman: I beg your pardon! We have been reviewed and recognized by the federal government as being worthy of providing valid evaluations of teacher training institutions!

Socrates: You make a good point, but it does not negate any of the problems we have discussed. Isn't it possible that the Feds are unaware of the problems and have assumed that your practices are more appropriate than they really are?

Dickerman: Possibly, but you're impugning everybody's competence—recognized accrediting agencies, colleges of education, and the feds.

Socrates: If what I say is untrue, show where it is flawed.

Dickerman: You indicated that we don't concern ourselves with the skill level of the incoming student; however, we require high standards for students who are admitted to our institutions.

Socrates: By high standards do you mean that the students who are admitted have more of the skills that the successful teacher has or that they have more capacity to learn those skills?

Dickerman: More capacity. We require higher grade-point averages and we carefully review the records of all applicants. Some of our institutions select only one of three applicants.

Socrates: And am I correct in assuming that this is not simply a ritual but that you have strong correlational data to show that these students have a higher rate of being successful at teaching than the students you reject?

Dickerman: Well as I said earlier, we don't conduct such studies, but it makes common sense that students with higher overall ability to learn and who have a history of working hard in high school will do better than those who are rejected.

Socrates: Unfortunately, science is not in the business of common sense but of facts. Given that you don't even have an inventory of the skills that highly successful teachers have, and given that your curricular sequences are not specifically designed to teach these skills, how could you possibly know that you are not rejecting many students who are as likely or more likely to become highly successful than many of the ones you admit?

Dickerman: For one thing, if they don't have a strong academic background, they won't be able to pass the more-demanding courses.

Socrates: But do the students who pass these courses emerge with more of the skills an exceptional teacher has?

Dickerman: I already indicated that I don't know. But you're overlooking the fact that we have made the course of study more rigorous. Many of the institutions we

accredit now require five years of study to complete the program, which includes a full year of supervised teaching. Certainly, these provisions should guarantee well-prepared teachers.

Socrates: Possibly, but the defining characteristic of an excellent teacher remains specific skills, and unless you assure that your graduates have these skills, your added rigor is simply a wish. Let me state it differently: Some who have successfully trained excellent teachers of at-risk elementary children declare that teachers can acquire all these skills in two or three years of training if the program focuses on these skills, not questionable peripheral content.

Dickerman: I totally disagree. The institution must instill a conception of teaching that frames the classroom in a broader context, one that is sensitive to students' realities and needs. Without it, we are left with a narrow recipe book and canned formulas for teaching.

Socrates: Your choice of words indeed suggests an emotional justification for your position, but Occam's razor addresses only those constructs that are logically unnecessary, regardless of emotional attachment to them. If something has no relevant function, it should be excised or at least not included until the central skills the students need have been addressed.

Dickerman: I think that kind of reasoning deprives students of important perspectives that go beyond the nuts and bolts of instruction.

Socrates: Consider a parallel situation. In the 13th century universities across Europe installed courses of study for doctors of medicine. This degree required *ten years* of rigorous, challenging work. Why didn't this extended program assure that the graduates were highly proficient practitioners?

Dickerman: I presume the answer you want is it failed because the content was flawed and didn't teach them what they needed to know. But I don't think that example is fair. Our content is not flawed.

Socrates: Did those who installed this rigorous content of the medical schools know it was flawed?

Dickerman: Of course not.

Socrates: Isn't the only basis you have for judging that its content was flawed facts that reveal the flaws?

Dickerman: Yes.

Socrates: Is it possible that if you knew more about the skills a highly effective teacher has, you would be able to see how your conception of priorities about what should be taught is flawed?

Dickerman: Possibly, but I can't imagine an educated teacher who did not have a broad perspective of education and its role in society.

Socrates: Is teaching an art?

Dickerman: Yes, I would say definitely yes, and that's the point.

Socrates: Is medicine an art?

Dickerman: Well ...yes ... in the sense that the gifted doctor provides clever diagnoses and solutions.

Socrates: The course of study for doctors of medicine in the 13th century was also based on the belief that it was an art, which is why one of the required studies was original arts training.

Dickerman: You're kidding.

Socrates: No, and if you seriously viewed the priorities and content of your five-year program with the same skepticism that you show for original arts training, you would conclude "you're kidding" in response to many of your priorities.

Dickerman: Like what?

Socrates: Like the advertised criteria of leading colleges of education. Consider those espoused by a west-coast college of education that is consistently ranked in the top ten. Its descriptions for its unified teacher licensure program seem to be as unreasonable as original arts training. The first two standards are these:

- **Prepares teachers to be aware of social and cultural influences in the classroom**
- **Focuses on educational justice**

Dickerman: I fail to see anything unreasonable about these standards.

Socrates: Why are they so far removed from instruction?

Dickerman: I don't see that they are far removed.

Socrates: Why should teachers be aware of social and cultural influences in the classroom unless teachers are going to do something with the information?

Dickerman: I think it's assumed that the teacher is going to use them as guides for understanding how the structure of the children's families and patterns of social intercourse have shaped their attitudes. The teacher has to be sensitive to the powerful influence of their cultural and religious beliefs.

Socrates: And after the teacher has acquired this sensitivity, how is it to be used?

Dickerman: To do a better job of teaching.

Socrates: Then why doesn't the first item say, Prepares teachers to *manage* social and cultural influences in the classroom?

Dickerman: I think you're splitting hairs. Before the teacher can manage the influences, the teacher has to be aware of them.

Socrates: Indeed. But is it possible for one to be aware of these influences without having any understanding of how to manage them in the classroom?

Dickerman: Yes, that's possible, but I think it is reasonable to assume that if teachers know what the relationships are, they will know how to manage them.

Socrates: You are aware of these influences. So if I presented a specific example of cultural influences adversely affecting instruction, would you know how to solve the problem efficiently?

Dickerman: Not necessarily, but I'm not a teacher.

Socrates: Let's bestow a degree on you and declare that you are a teacher. Now do you know any more about how to do it than you did before?

Dickerman: No, but ...

Socrates: Then you prove that mere awareness is not sufficient for one to manage these influences.

Dickerman: Mmmm.

Socrates: Furthermore and more relevant, wouldn't the teacher observe any specific examples of these influences in that classroom?

Dickerman: Yes, but then the teacher would have to have knowledge about how to provide solutions to these problems.

Socrates: That's the point I was trying to make. The training must provide instructional remedies.

Dickerman: Mmmm.

Socrates: The second priority the college advertises indicates that the program focuses on educational justice. How is this focus any more relevant to the teacher's skills as a teacher than original arts is to medical doctor's skills?

Dickerman: Teachers are agents of change. If they understand educational justice, they'll be able to communicate the need for it, and they'll be able to affect changes in how their students and others view educational injustice.

Socrates: Exactly what is educational justice?

Dickerman: It's a theory of justice that derives from economics. It assumes that a person's knowledge and skill level constitute an asset, that they influence the person's future earnings, lifestyle, and so forth. To be just, the educational system should be designed to distribute this asset fairly to the full range of students, not just to the advantaged students. The theory assumes that students have a role in determining their asset, but not at the primary grade level. Here, students are assumed to lack knowledge needed to make thoughtful choices. As children grow older and more skilled, they become increasingly responsible for their educational decisions.

Socrates: So, educational justice is a kind of affirmative action that is designed to insure that at-risk children acquire as much skill and knowledge as more fortunate students.

Dickerman: Correct.

Socrates: Here's a situation: A teacher has a class of 24 first-grade, at-risk children. Six of them are learning well; the rest are seriously behind in reading, math, and language. The teacher has no aide. She follows the school-mandated rules about what to teach and when. There is no language period. There are no waivers for teachers to use reading programs other than the one installed by the district. This program has a poor performance record with at-risk children. Exactly, how does this teacher go about meting out educational justice in the classroom?

Dickerman: Well, that sounds like a challenging situation.

Socrates: Yes, but would you say it is atypical?

Dickerman: In one sense. Not all teachers face this kind of challenge.

Socrates: But nearly all who work with children who desperately need educational justice do.

Dickerman: There are some things the teacher might do. Involve the parents more. Get more people in the classroom. Contact volunteers and public-service organizations, arrange with older students to partner with the younger children who are struggling. Possibly set up an after-school program ...

Socrates: Is the teacher hired to engineer the means for teaching children or hired to teach?

Dickerman: Hired to teach. But in this case ...

Socrates: Name one of the possibilities you listed that is the responsibility of the teacher, not of the school or the district.

Dickerman: That's hard to answer.

Socrates: If teachers in every classroom that needed educational justice had to do things like contact volunteers do you really think there would be enough volunteers to go around?

Socrates: Probably not.

Socrates: More relevant, do you think that the things you listed would significantly change the performance of the children?

Dickerman: They would certainly help.

Socrates: Where's the data supporting that claim?

Dickerman: Offhand I can't reference it, but there are a number of studies that confirm that more time on-task leads to better performance.

Socrates: Before we discuss time on-task, let's look at the problem another way. Some community groups have campaigned for educational justice. Do their recommendations target individual teachers or districts?

Dickerman: I'm not sure.

Socrates: The Coalition for Educational Justice lists some remedies. Are you familiar with them?

Dickerman: I'm familiar with the coalition but I don't remember the specifics.

Socrates: Here is a list of things the coalition assumes should be done.

- Add More Time to the School Day and Year
- Provide a Well-Rounded, College-Preparatory Curriculum for all Students
- Attract, Train and Keep the Best Teachers and Principals
- Provide Strong, Comprehensive Support for Every Child
- Put the Parents Back in Public Education.

How many of those changes are under the teacher's control?

Dickerman: Possibly providing comprehensive support.

Socrates: The teachers who provide children with the skills and knowledge they need satisfy their part of comprehensive support. But do you agree that beyond this, the teacher has very little control over educational justice in the classroom?

Dickerman: Not entirely. One recommendation refers to attracting training and keeping the best teachers.

Socrates: That's not a teacher function, unless the policy calls for teachers to rate themselves.

Dickerman: Mmmm.

Socrates: The recommendations are apparently designed for action on the level of school districts and policy makers, not teachers. Note also that the recommendation to attract and train teachers assumes that teachers who are attracted need further training.

Dickerman: Yes, but that doesn't mean they need to be trained from scratch.

Socrates: True, but either way, it appears that teachers have no significant role in providing educational justice except to do the best they can within the educational framework that exists. However, if teachers are not in control of educational justice beyond their individual efforts, why would a teacher-training institution assert that it has a *focus* on educational justice?

Dickerman: Because teachers need to know about it and its manifestations in the classroom.

Socrates: How long would it take to provide smart college students, like the ones that are recruited, with information on what educational justice is and what the various recommendations are?

Dickerman: I'm not sure.

Socrates: I cannot imagine devoting more than 3 hours of class time to pretty well exhaust the topic both in the broad sociological sense and in terms of more specific classroom implications.

Dickerman: Why so little time?

Socrates: Aside from the fact that teachers have very little control over educational justice, the recommendations provided by you and by the Coalition for Educational Justice don't address *instructional causes* of the problem or *instructional solutions*, so they serve as something of a wish list.

Dickerman: How do you arrive at that conclusion?

Socrates: The core of the problem is that the teaching these children receive is not adequate for them to keep pace with more-advantaged populations. Yet, not one of the recommendations for achieving educational justice refers to *instruction*, not even in the broadest sense of installing instructional programs that have strong data of effectiveness.

Dickerman: That conclusion doesn't seem to follow at all. How can you deny that increasing the length of the school day and the school year would influence student achievement? Certainly, if the total school time were increased by several months, there would be a significant rise in performance.

Socrates: On average there would be improvement, but the solution is circuitous because it does not imply changing the instruction, just delivering poor instruction over more time with the hope that something positive will result.

Dickerman: If more time on-task is not an instructional solution, what is?

Socrates: A solution that is based on the assumption that if the time currently available in the schools is used more effectively, the rate of learning will increase, thereby reducing the performance gap between advantaged and at-risk populations.

Dickerman: Do you honestly believe that if a school used what you consider the most effective programs, it would eliminate the gap between at-risk and advantaged students?

Socrates: No, but good teachers using good material and practices can narrow the gap a lot more than poor teachers using poor material and practices for a longer period of time. Furthermore, the solution of improving the instruction is more consistent with the notion of educational justice.

Dickerman: Why is that?

Socrates: Because the teacher is the keystone of such justice, not a remote participant. The district can attain considerable justice by simply changing the teacher education and the tools they use in the current framework. Also, if the longer school day is provided only for at-risk students, the practice is more discriminatory than the solution of making better use of the available time with better teaching. Students are not punished by being subjected to a longer work day.

Dickerman: Well, let me play devil's advocate. Where is your hard data that teachers trained with what you call a scientific method are superior?

Socrates: The Follow Through study provides considerable evidence. Follow Through classrooms had either one or two aides. The Direct Instruction model, which outperformed all other models on everything measured, used all classroom aides as teachers, solely responsible for the instruction children received. In the typical first-grade classroom, the teacher taught reading. A parent aide taught language, and another taught math. Not only was the average aide rated by trainers to be as effective as the average teacher, classroom data totally confirmed the trainer rating. In fact, by the end of third grade, math and language performance of students exceeded that of reading.

Dickerman: Are you saying the parent aides outperformed the certified teachers?

Socrates: No, but they certainly performed as well, on average, and far above the average of current teachers of at-risk students.

Dickerman: Well, your report sounds suspicious. In the first place teachers are responsible for delivering instruction. I can't imagine school districts signing off on deploying aides as teachers.

Socrates: They didn't sign off. The teacher was "technically" responsible for the instruction. In practice this meant that the teacher assigned the teaching

responsibilities to the aides. In extreme cases, the teacher had to present the first part of the first exercise each day, then turn the group over to the aide who actually taught the lesson. In all classrooms, however, the aides taught subjects.

Dickerman: And what made these aides so good?

Socrates: Training--preservice and in-class coaching. But it didn't take four years for both the teachers and the aides to become highly proficient. By the end of their second year teaching DI, both aides and teachers were about 90% as good as they would become after four years. Note, however, that a very small percentage of the aides would meet the entrance requirements of an average accredited college of education.

Dickerman: I'm at a loss for words. You seem to have all these insights that nobody else seems to possess. Where can I get the data you refer to?

Socrates: The technical reports submitted by Becker to the Office of Education provide training details. The Abt Follow Through final report on the performance of the Follow Through models provides descriptive statistical data.

Dickerman: Well, quite frankly, I'm skeptical.

Socrates: Skepticism is productive, so long as it doesn't serve as a prejudicial barrier to investigation.

Dickerman: What are you trying to say?

Socrates: If you're skeptical, investigate in a way that would clearly determine whether your skepticism is well grounded.

Dickerman: And how would I do that?

Socrates: Run a simple study, possibly like the one that Becker engineered in a couple of schools. He selected 16-year old students who were doing reasonably well in at-risk high schools and who expressed an interest in becoming teachers. They received high-school credit for working possibly two hours a day in primary classrooms of a neighborhood Follow Through school. They received an abbreviated version of preservice training, and were monitored in the classroom by good teachers. By the end of their senior year in high school they were rated by trainers to teach and manage as well as the better teachers and aides.

Dickerman: So you're saying that in two years these students learned more than our teacher-training interns learn in five years! I'm sorry but that sounds like a real fish tale to me.

Socrates: But it also sounds like a very cheap study that would be easy to replicate.

Dickerman: Well, I think you should talk to somebody in the study-replication business. That's certainly not me.

Socrates: But if you have healthy skepticism wouldn't it be worth your organization's time to conduct such a study?

Dickerman: I wouldn't know. I only work there, and I don't unilaterally make these kinds of decisions.

Socrates: But wouldn't you consider discussing this possibility with other decision makers in your organization?

Dickerman: No, I wouldn't. [He stands up and looks at his watch.] Listen, I'm late for lunch. But thank you for sharing your insights with me. Have a good day.

—End—