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Teaching is a Calling: Or is it?

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Introduction

Recently I had the honor of leading a workshop for the *Reflective Practice SIG* from Korea TESOL in Seoul and one topic that received discussion from the participants was what an assumption that teaching is a calling. This discussion and reflection also made me reflect on my views about this maxim. So in this short article I will revisit this sometimes taken-for-granted assumption that *teaching is a calling*.

‘Teaching Is A Calling’

Assumptions are usually unarticulated (and taken-for-granted) beliefs about our practice, and so we are usually not aware of what they mean to us. However, it is important for us to consciously reflect on our (taken-for-granted) assumptions so that we may uncover what guides us in practice (Farrell, 2015). In addition, we must also become more aware of those who are all too willing to make assumptions for us that may not be in our best interests as teachers. Let’s take one widely held assumption about teaching that has been handed down through the ages in the following maxim: *Teaching is a calling*. Most teachers are probably aware of this maxim about their work and many may even follow such a maxim but what does it really mean and are we as teachers in full control of this maxim?

If we take ‘a calling’ from a religious perspective we can see that the maxim ‘teaching as a calling’ transcends the ‘normal’ view of what we think a job such as working in a fast food restaurant in that the ‘calling’ becomes an act of selfless dedication to the work rather than just picking up a paycheck at the end of the week or month; those who are ‘called’ like those in religious organizations have a ‘vocation’ that seems to have come from ‘above’ and thus teaching is more than an job. Then we can ask what about teaching as a profession, is this included in the ‘calling’?

The assumption ‘Teaching as a calling’ has been around for some time with the idea that those who are ‘called’ will make a difference in the world, but I wonder whose interests does it really serves? Let’s examine a recent comment by an experienced ESL teaching in Canada about her teaching:

I see my biggest challenge as achieving a balance in my life. I am actively involved in a lot of things outside of the classroom and I enjoy that, but I stay at work too late and I come home very tired every day. Work responsibilities can overtake personal and home life.

If we consider that this teacher’s selfless service has become self-destructive ‘workaholism’ then we can sense that the ‘calling’ has become distorted somewhat because she has now become totally exhausted in her dedication to her work. The idea of selfless service by teachers may have been designed by educational institutions who give increased teaching loads to teachers as well

as large classes and extra ‘voluntary’ duties to carry out within the institution all in the name of dedication to students’ learning. Perhaps the vocation of teaching and the ‘calling’ was once even embraced by many teachers but now we can see it can begin to work against their individual best interests. I suspect that many teachers deep down also begin to wonder if their sense of calling has become distorted but if they complain because they are becoming exhausted they can be seen to be ‘whining’ by the administration (Farrell, 2015). We can ask then whose interests are being served. Given that a greater workload with larger classes means a saving of money for the administration, we could suggest that the administration benefits most—the students surely are not benefiting from tired teachers, or from overcrowded classrooms. Thus, second/foreign language teachers need to be reflective so that they are able to distinguish between justifiable and necessary dedication to their students’ learning and a self-destructive ‘workaholicism’ that may be fostered by an institution’s desire to save money rather than maximize students’ learning (Brookfield, 1995).

Conclusion

In this short article I examined a much taken-for-granted maxim about our work: *teaching is a calling*. This is an assumption about our work that should be uncovered and examined by all second/foreign language teachers so that each teacher can take a critically reflective stance on its place in their teaching world. It is important not only to reflect on our own assumptions about our practice but also to uncover assumptions (sometimes called hegemonic assumptions) that have been created and even imposed by others to see if they are in our best interests or if they are harmful to our teaching. Teachers must be on guard against those institutions that would try to exploit their selfless dedication to their students’ learning so that this maxim does not become harmful to their practice. Perhaps teaching *is* a calling but it must be *our* calling and not designed by those who would exploit our selflessness.

References

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