



Relevance of Max Weber's Verstehen Approach as Teaching Method

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The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Rapid changes and the increasing complexity of modern education system brought forth numerous challenging situations for teachers and scholars of different fields. Amongst, the most challenging task is the innovation and application of unique and different teaching methodologies, which further balances the curriculum and increases the learning capacity of students. Many teaching methods already exist in the field of education such as Lecture Method, Discussion Method, Socratic Questioning Method etc. These methods are used both collectively and separately. The established efficiency of these methods is evident by their exponential relevance in different fields. However, to transfigure teaching into a riveting experience for students, there is need of more conscious efforts to devise new teaching skills or to draw inspiration from the core theoretical work of renowned scholars of different fields and apply those ideas, directly or with some modifications in the classroom teaching. Therefore, in the present article, an effort has been made to understand the application and relevance of Max Weber's *Verstehen approach* as a teaching method in classroom settings.

Keywords: *Max weber; verstehen approach; teaching method; education system; innovation.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

As Bertrand Russell said, "More important than the curriculum is the question of the methods of teaching and the spirit in which the teaching is given" [1]. Accordingly, there is a great importance of teaching-learning methods in education system. The continuous changes and increasing complexity of modern education system has brought forth numerous challenging situations for teachers and scholars of different fields. Amongst, the most challenging task is the innovation and application of unique and different teaching methodologies, which further balances the curriculum and increases the learning capacity of students. There are number of studies which shows, the teachers all over the world are constantly probing for contemporary methods to develop their skills as an educator for effective classroom teaching.

Many teaching methods already exist in the field of education such as lecture method, discussion method, Socratic questioning method etc. These methods are used both collectively and separately. The established efficiency of these methods is evident by their exponential relevance in different fields. However, to transfigure teaching into a riveting experience for students, there is need of more conscious efforts to devise new teaching skills or to draw inspiration from the core theoretical work of renowned scholars of different fields and apply those ideas, directly or with some modifications in the classroom teaching. Therefore, in the present article, an effort has been made to understand the application and relevance of Max Weber's¹ *Verstehen approach* as a teaching method in classroom settings.

Verstehen is a German word, literally means 'to understand', and was used by Max Weber as his core theoretical idea [2]. It is an outcome of modern *Hermeneutics* and methodological controversy of 1880's. Since time immemorial scholars have applied this approach in various situations. Some of them are George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, Howard Garfinkel etc. For Weber, Verstehen seems to be akin to 'empathy' [3]. In other words, Verstehen means empathetic understanding or interpretative understanding of

human social action² or we can say, it refers to an understanding of the meaning of an action from the actor's point of view [4]. In addition to this Verstehen mainly includes treating the actors as a subject rather than treating them object.

Furthermore, Verstehen is Weber's methodological tool to explain, not all types of behavior, but behavior which is of a social nature [5]. Therefore, we may say that Verstehen has no relation with physical objects but with human consciousness and behavior which is intentional, meaningful and subjectively understandable. In other words, Weber considered that the emergence of Verstehen can be seen only as a result of human discourse. On similar lines, a renowned sociologist C. H. Cooley describes;

"Verstehen as developed from contact with minds of other men 'which sets going a process of thought and sentiments similar to theirs and enables us to understand them by sharing their states of mind.' he calls it social and personal knowledge" [6].

Although Weber has not used Verstehen method to understand classroom teaching-learning behaviors, however, we may apply his method to systematically comprehend classroom interactions or to understand the behavior of students. Therefore, the present article primarily discusses how Weber's Verstehen is helpful for transforming classroom teaching effective and interesting.

2. VERSTEHEN AS METHOD OF TEACHING

The determination of a student's behavior, whether rational or nonrational, is quite different from that of nonsocial objects or physical objects. For instance, there is a huge difference between

¹Max Weber (1864-1920) was German sociologist and one of the modern fathers of sociology. Except Verstehen approach he is known for his works such as *Protestant Ethics and Spirit of Capitalism, Economy and Society, Social Action, and Concept of Authority, Bureaucracy and many more.*

² Any action which is intentional, meaningful and subjectively understandable is a social action. In addition to this action is only social action if, and then only in so far as, it takes account of the behavior of someone else [5]. For instance, people who stand up for national anthem is a social action whereas people who jostled in a crowded departmental store may not qualify social action. Similarly, if a teacher is teaching a lesson in the class and students are listening the teacher carefully, according to Weber it is a social action because it is intentional (teacher have intention to impart knowledge and students are gathered intentionally to take knowledge), meaningful (concerning to syllabus or focused towards a particular goal), subjectively understandable (it is oriented towards subjective human beings not physical objects like machines). Therefore, Social actions take place only when the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to the act and when the act takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course [4]

understanding Newton's laws of motion and understanding his machinations in his dealing with Leibnitz and the Royal Society [7]. The latter instance is attached with values, therefore, can be understood by applying Verstehen or empathy.

As aforementioned in the introduction, Weber used this method in the larger context for understanding of human social actions, therefore the use of Verstehen can be seen in many areas by various scholars in this world. Many of them applied this approach in primary research during data collection process, as it helps to disclose the behavior and perception of respondents, therefore facilitates us to understand social reality. It can also be applied in our day to day interactions with people around us. Further, it can help us, improve our perception towards various aspects of the society. As it encompasses a larger context, it is worthwhile to use it as a teaching method to understand the behavior and actions of students and to make classroom experience enriching for all of them. In the modern era, educational patterns are forever changing which make it indispensable to utilize such kind of methodologies to assimilate knowledge amongst students. There are following procedures or strategies by which we can apply this method to understand the behavior of students and give them a good education.

To enumerate, Verstehen involves a two-way process of communication between two different persons. In a classroom setting, it works in the form of an interaction between the teacher and the students. There is always a certain level of collective consciousness, which makes the interaction between teacher and students efficacious. This collective conscience sets the common ground for discourse amongst both, the teacher and the students. Further, this interpersonal communication process culminates into bi-directional empathetic reactions on the part of both, the teacher and the student [4]. Therefore, it can be said that empathy works at both the levels but how it works requires special understanding.

The very first step to apply the Verstehen approach is to build up an empathetic mindset that will assist in the interpretation of the situation. It will also aid in analyzing the classroom behavior in a systematic manner. Building an empathetic mindset up is not a simple task and requires a conjunct understanding of a particular context or situation.

In the process of forming an empathetic mindset, an observer has to imagine himself/herself at the place of others. This will help the observer to understand needs of the others. We can understand this by some examples. A teacher entered in the class and said 'good morning students!' In response, teacher gets the lazy reply by students. Teacher looks at the students and started discussion on some interesting social issue rather than teaching a scheduled course. As soon as teacher gets the attention of students, he/she transposed the discussion towards course syllabus. Here we may say that the teacher might thought about there is need to get the attention of students as they seem weary and indifferent. Teacher empathetically understands the social situation and imagines himself/herself at the place of students to understand the reason behind their actions or reactions. This became possible because teacher may have already experienced this situation earlier in the classroom.

To further substantiate, another example can be placed here. In a class, the teacher was giving lesson to students and suddenly teacher noticed that a student was deliberately creating disruption again and again in class. The teacher warns student with a symbolic gesture with the help of eyes/fingers and continued with teaching. Here teacher empathetically understood the mental state of the student. He might thought that the student is naughty and wants to disturb the class, therefore he decided to resolve the matter after the class so that the classroom teaching should not be disturbed. In this example, the teacher placed himself at the place of student to understand his behavior and acted accordingly.

Another example can be taken here for understanding the application of Verstehen. A teacher was teaching students by using lecture method in a class and he/she observed that few students were not taking interest in the class. The teacher immediately started group discussion so that every student can take part in discussion and be attentive. Here teacher has imaginatively placed himself at the place of children and thought, students may have been bored due to continuous lectures or some other reasons because of which they were not taking interest in the class. Therefore, he thought to use group discussion method rather than lecture method to turn session interactive and interesting. Here we may say that Verstehen can also be applied as a intermediate tool to apply

different methods. Further it also helps to choose and apply different method of teaching at different time and space.

These examples show the application of Verstehen. An observer or interpreter (Teacher) centers on a particular set of circumstances and perceives the connection between, what Theodore Abel calls stimulus and response in his text [8]. The observer understands the situation because at one or another time he has been exposed to the similar situation. Thus, in the first and second example teacher put himself at the place of students to understand their behavior from their point of view and modify his action accordingly. The question also comes here that for any number of reasons the observer might be mistaken in his interpretation. Therefore, the Verstehen is not a method of verification due to subjective nature of human beings but it can provide hypothetical solutions and a deeper understanding of situations through internalization and subsequent recalling of relevant experiences. This may be considered as one of the draw backs of this approach and one has to take care about it.

Further, we may say that empathetic mindset is an important personal asset that a teacher can use in the classroom teaching-learning process to make his teaching effective, interesting and worth. There are some other important requirements for effective application of this method in classroom teaching. Hence it is evident that Verstehen can be effectively applied to understand intentional, meaningful and subjectively coherent social actions or behaviors, therefore it is important to determine whether the interaction which takes place between teacher and student is social action or not. To make teaching more effective, all those interactions should be avoided which are not social actions. For instance, if a teacher is also holding a charge as warden boys hostel and students starts discussing their hostel problems in class rather than asking questions concerning to their course, according to Weber it may not a social action. This can affect classroom teaching and class norms because the teacher is supposed to discuss the hostel problems separately. Therefore, Verstehen is a methodological tool to understand behavior which is of a social in nature.

After looking at above-mentioned examples, these are the important requirements which are mentioned in the following sequence for

application of verstehen method. (a) Firstly, there is a need to be at the level of students initially and then slowly moving up and assisting them in new experiences (b) Participation in the situation is important for the application of Verstehen. There is a necessity of involving a situation or context in which the individual action occurs in a meaningful explanation of action. Thus, before empathizing with others, one must understand the situation or context in which the social action is taking place and compare it with earlier experiences. (c) It is both way process, therefore, a certain level of understanding about situation or context should be there amongst both the actor and the observer. For instance, in a classroom teaching, Verstehen can be applied only if a teacher and student are conscious about the discourse taking place in the classroom. Verstehen involves two-way communication between the teacher and the student. This two-way process ideally culminates in di-directional empathetic reaction on the part of both teacher and student [4] (d) It will work more effectively if there is a particular social relationship between observer and actor. (e) There is no need to go inside the individual to judge their behavior as like psychologist often do. R. M. Meclvere numerating on this point, emphasized that to understand the human actions and their reasons one need not go inside the individual psyche; however, we can know this by entering into the social situation in which the action happens [5]. (f) W. I. Thomas points out that a social situation is further bound by social values norms and rules. To understand the action of an individual, one needs to be informed of the rules and norms of that social situation [9]. (g) It can be applied to human beings and not to physical objects. (h) In various instances, there is a need to use a fictitious situation or a current issue in the classroom to apply Verstehen. (i) There is a necessity to include stories and narratives concerning earlier experiences and so on.

3. CONCLUSION

At last it can be concluded that with the passage of time, addition of modern techniques and methodological tools in teaching process has become a need of time. This is important to make classroom teaching more effective and interesting. Verstehen is a method of common sense which generates the ability of a teacher to imagine one's self-performance and behavior of students in the class which ultimately help the teacher to impart knowledge among students. It also helps the teacher to address various other classroom problems. We may also say that

Verstehen involves combining together the stimulus and response through a number of appropriate experiences. This may be called as Internalization process. To conclude, the success of a teacher depends upon the systematic, coherent exchange of ideas amongst the teacher and the students and further Weber's Verstehen is basically a tool through which a teacher can systematically visualize himself/herself at the position of a student to effectively understand the actions or behavior of students and make teaching-learning convenient for students accordingly. In simple words, Verstehen can be helpful for a teacher along with other methods such as lecture method, group discussion method, question method etc. Thus, in the modern education system Verstehen has a great role to play for both teachers and students.

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Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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