

# RELEVANCE OF MAX WEBER'S VERSTEHEN APPROACH AS TEACHING METHOD

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## **ABSTRACT**

Rapid changes and the increasing complexity of modern education system brings forth numerous challenging situations for teachers and scholars of different fields. Amongst these, the most challenging yet rewarding task in the modern education system is the application of unique or different teaching methodologies which harmonizes the curriculum and renders it invigorating for the students whilst challenging their learning capacity. 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 in isolation. The established efficiency of these methods is evident by their exponential relevance in different fields. However, to transfigure teaching into a riveting experience for both teachers and students, we must make more conscious efforts to devise new teaching skills or we must try to draw inspiration from the core theoretical work of renowned scholars of different fields and apply those ideas, directly or with some modifications, to enhance classroom teaching experience. Therefore in the present article, an effort has been made to apply Max Weber's<sup>1</sup> theory of *Verstehen* as a teaching method in classroom settings.

**Keywords:** Max Weber, Verstehen approach, Teaching Method, Education System, Innovation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

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<sup>1</sup> Max 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.

*More important than the curriculum is the question of the **methods of teaching** and the spirit in which the teaching is given.*

**-Bertrand Russell<sup>2</sup>**

Rapid changes and the increasing complexity of modern education system brings forth numerous challenging situations for teachers and scholars of different fields. Amongst these, the most challenging yet rewarding task in the modern education system is the application of unique or different teaching methodologies which harmonizes the curriculum and renders it invigorating for the students whilst challenging their learning capacity. As a result there is an abundance of data that suggests that 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 in isolation. The established efficiency of these methods is evident by their exponential relevance in different fields. However, to transfigure teaching into a riveting experience for both teachers and students, we must make more conscious efforts to devise new teaching skills or we must try to draw inspiration from the core theoretical work of renowned scholars of different fields and apply those ideas, directly or with some modifications, to enhance classroom teaching experience. Therefore in the present article, an effort has been made to apply Max Weber's<sup>3</sup> theory of *Verstehen* as a teaching method in classroom settings.

*Verstehen* is a German word, literally means 'to understand', and was used by Weber as his core theoretical idea in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell, *On Education*, New York: Routledge, (2014), available at <https://www.google.co.in/search?tbo=p&tbm=bks&q=isbn:131785814X>, accessed on 18/10/2018.

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<sup>4</sup> Frank W. Elwell, *Verstehen: The Sociology of Max Weber*, Rogers State University, (1996), available at <http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/~felwell/Theorists/Weber/Whome2.htm> accessed on 21/01/2019.

Goffman, Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, Howard Garfinkel etc. For Weber, *Verstehen* seems to be akin to ‘empathy’. In other words, *Verstehen* means empathetic understanding or interpretative understanding of human social action<sup>5</sup> or we can say, it refers to an understanding of the meaning of an action from the actor’s point of view.<sup>6</sup> In other words, this can be understood as a meaningful understanding of social action or empathy where a person puts himself at place of other persons to look at things from their perspective. 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 behavior, but behavior which is of a social nature.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, we may say that *Verstehen* has no relation with physical objects but rather human consciousness and behavior which is intentional, meaningful and subjectively understandable. In addition to this Weber considered that the emergence of *Verstehen* can be seen only as a result of human discourse. In this line, 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”.*<sup>8</sup>

Although Weber has not applied this method to understand classroom teaching-learning behaviors, however, we can apply this method to systematically comprehend classroom

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<sup>5</sup> 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 (Turker). For instance, people who stand up for national anthem is a social action whereas people who jostled in a crowded department store does not qualify social action. Similarly, if teacher is teaching a lesson in the class and students are listening the teacher carefully, according to Weber 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 (Ken Morrison 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Ken Morrison, *Marx, Durkheim, Weber: Formations of Modern Social Thought*, New Delhi: SAGE, (2006).

<sup>7</sup> William T. Tucker, ‘Max Weber’s “Verstehen”’, *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1965), pp. 157-165, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4105245> accessed on 14-02-2019.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy J. Tomasi ‘The operation called VERSTEHEN’, *Improving College and University Teaching*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp157-158, (1973), available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27564526.pdf?refreqid=excelsior:9bb2686c6e1600f7ddf6dc9b63d5e9a4>, accessed on 12-04-2019.

interactions or to understand the behavior of students. This can assist us in transforming teaching into an engrossing experience, especially at college and university level. Therefore the present article primarily discusses how Weber's method is helpful for transforming classroom teaching into interesting mode and to understanding the behavior of students in the class. Further, it helps in transmuting the classroom teaching into a more holistic and stimulating experience.

### **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 understanding Newton's laws of motion and understanding his machinations in his dealing with Leibnitz and the Royal Society.<sup>9</sup> 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

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Merton, *Behavior Patterns of Scientists*, The American scholar, Spring, 1969.

teacher and the students. There is always a certain level of consciousness, which by working through a collective conscience, 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.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it can be said that empathy works at both the levels but how it works requires special understanding. The application of this method can be seen as follows.

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 facile 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 in the place of others. This will help the observer to understand needs of the others. We can understand this by some examples. A teacher enters in the class and said ‘good morning students!’ In response, he gets the lazy reply by students. He looks at the students and rather than teaching a course he started a discussion on a trending current social issue. As he gets the attention of students, the teacher transposed the discussion with the course syllabus. Here we may say that the teacher might think that there is need to get the attention of students as they are weary and indifferent. Teacher empathetically understands the social situation and imagines himself at the place of students to understand the reason behind their actions. This is possible because he has already experienced this situation earlier in the classroom.

To further substantiate, in a class, the teacher is giving lesson to students and suddenly a teacher notices a student deliberately creating disruption in class. The teacher warns student with a symbolic gesture with eyes or hand and continued with teaching. Here teacher empathetically understands the mental state of the student. He might be thought that the student is naughty and wants to disturb the class, therefore he thought to give him a punishment after the class so that the classroom teaching should not be disturbed. This might have been part of his experience before. In this example, the teacher places himself in the place of the student to understand his behavior and acted accordingly.

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<sup>10</sup> *Supra* 6

Another example can be taken here of a teacher giving a lesson by using lecture method in a class and observed a few students are not taking interest in the class. The teacher immediately starts a group discussion. Here teacher imaginatively placed himself in the place of children and might be thought that students have been barred due to continuous lectures since morning because of which they are not taking an interest. Therefore he thought despite giving a lecture to them, group discussion will be fruitful for this time. Here we can also say that *Verstehen* 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<sup>11</sup> calls stimulus and response in his text. 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 in the place of students to understand their behavior from their point of view and modify the 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 drawbacks of this approach.

By looking at above examples 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 to effectively apply 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, there should be express avoidance of all those interactions which are not social actions. For instance, if

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<sup>11</sup> Theodore Abel, 'The Operation Called Verstehen,' *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 54, (1948), pp. 211-218.

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 is not a social action. This can affect classroom teaching and class norms because the teacher is suppose to discuss the hostel problems separately. Therefore, *Verstehen* is a methodological tool to understand not all social behavior but only that behavior which is of a social in nature.

Some other important requirements are as such; (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 pupil<sup>12</sup> (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. Meclver* enumerating on the 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.<sup>13</sup> (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, the rules and norms of that social situation.<sup>14</sup> (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.

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<sup>12</sup> *Supra* 6

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholas S. Timasheff, *Sociological Theory: Its Nature and Growth*, New York: Random House, (1957).

## COCLUDING REMARKS

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 behaviour of students in the class which ultimately help the teacher to impart knowledge among students in a right way. 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. *Verstehen* is basically a mental process through which a teacher can systematically visualize himself in the position of a student to effectively understand his actions. To conclude, it can be said that teachers, particularly in colleges and universities, should be aware of Weber's *Verstehen* method and its application in the classroom as it refines their teaching skills and helps them to disseminate their knowledge amongst students effectively. The success of a teacher depends upon the systematic, coherent exchange of ideas amongst the teacher and the students. In simple words, a teacher can effectively teach in class if empathetic understanding is taken into consideration along with other traditional methods of teaching such as lecture method, group discussion method, question method etc. The student's interest in the class can be substantially increased by creating learning situations which allow a student to expand his knowledge, and discard unacceptable behaviors' while modifying his personality in accordance to the requirement of the classroom teaching. Therefore *Verstehen* has a great role to play for both teachers and students likewise.

### Reference:

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