

Is Teaching a Skill?

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TEACHING AND EDUCATION

We may start with some fairly uncontroversial differences between education and teaching. First, usage supports regarding teaching, but not education, as a kind of *activity*. We might say: “please do not interrupt me while I’m teaching,” but it seems odd to say: “not now while I’m educating.” Teaching is also characterizable as an *intentional* activity; it is undertaken with the purpose of bringing about learning, which is why we can barely grasp what it is to teach in advance of some idea of what it is to learn. In this connection, it is worth noting that the surface grammar of pedagogical usage can be misleading. For example, we speak of X teaching Y, where Y is not infrequently ambiguous between persons and topics. Thus, we talk indifferently either of Mr. Smith teaching mathematics or of Miss Jones teaching Sarah or 4B, which can court such uncritical slogans as “one teaches children not subjects” (or vice versa). Such temptations are more easily resisted, however, once one grasps that the proper logical form of statements about teaching is better captured by “X teaches Y to Z”: that, in short, instruction is invariably a matter of teaching something to someone.

Education and educating, on the other hand, seem to be both more and less than activities. It is not just that educating and education are not, like teaching, subject to interruption by my tea break, but also that we can speak of education in circumstances where talk of teaching seems inappropriate (for example, education through experience) and that there are forms of teaching which may not be in any significant sense educational (for example, sports coaching). For related reasons, I should also want to resist talk of either teaching or education as *processes*, which I suspect follows from some popular confusion of education with schooling.¹ Unlike the activity of teaching or the process of schooling, which are sequences of acts or events which may have datable beginnings or ends, education has more the quality of a *state* with no clear beginning or end. Moreover, though it is natural to speak of schooling as a process we undergo or endure, it may be better to regard education, like teaching, as an enterprise or project which we undertake or in which we engage. Formally, then, we might say that schooling is the *process* we undergo in order to achieve (amongst other things) the *state* of education via the *activity* of teaching.

TEACHING AND SKILL

By this very token, however, it should be clear that what is conceptually separate is often enough practically or productively conjoined; teaching is one of the means by which education is often achieved (if it is) and education is a common purpose of teaching. Moreover, since it hardly needs saying that general *professional* interest in the nature of teaching is mostly focused upon its significance as an education promoting activity, I should make clear from the outset that the primary concern of this essay is with the nature of teaching as a means to the achievement of education. What is it, then, to regard the activity of teaching as a means to the realization of

education? There can be little doubt, I think, that contemporary pedagogical theorizing has been overtaken by a larger trend — no doubt reinforced by modern developments in experimental psychology — toward a general construal of goal-directed activities as *skills*. It is not just that skill talk is nowadays endemic in educational circles, but also that there has been a marked modern shift to conceptions of professional preparation, such as “competence based” programs, which seem disposed to a skill construal of all aspects of teaching, managerial and disciplinary as well as pedagogical.²

But why not? Indeed, how might we construe teaching, not least in the interests of assisting would-be teachers to teach better, in other than skill terms? In what follows, however, I shall argue that as well as (and in consequence of) general objections to the idea that all goal-directed acts and activities are skills, there seem to be *particular* objections to any exclusive skill account of teaching. The foremost complaint about the contemporary vocational trend toward characterizing each and every professional quality in skill terms — to talk indifferently of teaching, management, caring, and listening skills — is that it seems conceptually inflationary or self-undermining; in speaking of *all* intentional human behavior in skill terms, the wheels of such talk appear to idle for all substantial conceptual and practical purposes. But this prompts the further complaint that there surely *is* useful employment for skill talk in distinguishing genuine skills from other activities, qualities, and dispositions less appropriately so-called. On the face of it, for example, some of what seems naturally said of skills rings less true in relation to other human acts or endeavors: while it seems proper to encourage a nurse whose bed-making is faulty to go away and practice her bed-making skills, it seems bizarre to advise another who lacks qualities of care to practice her caring skills; again, though we might instruct that child who has not yet mastered basic arithmetic to practice her skills of addition, it seems less appropriate to have one who has not been listening rehearse her listening skills.

SKILL CONCEPTIONS: SCIENCE AND ART

Thus, it is not obvious that all human activities, tasks, and achievements are properly characterizable as skills, at any rate, on any distinctive conception of skill. But what would such a conception look like, and would it preclude a skill account of teaching? In fact, there would appear to be diverse candidate conceptions of skill. On one such conception, a skill is a systematic, possibly routinized, mode of instrumentality apt for the exploitation of causal regularities in the interests of various human productive purposes. This idea is not especially new, since it is at least as old as Aristotle’s notion of *techné*, but it has certainly risen to prominence in human cultural and economic thinking with the modern rise of empirical science and experimental method. In modern times, indeed, skill often seems synonymous with technical instrumentality, which, in turn, is widely regarded as tantamount to applied science.³ Moreover, the possibility of regarding teaching as a skill in this sense — as a technology of pedagogy — undoubtedly came into its own with the development through the twentieth century of experimental psychology as the science upon which such a *techné* might be constructed. There can be no doubt, for example, of the warm reception given to experimental learning theory, as paving the

way for a real science of pedagogy, by philosophers of the stature of John Dewey and Bertrand Russell.⁴ Indeed, contemporary educational theory and practice now bears the indelible marks of a century long tradition of behavioral scientific developments, which have also, one way or another, encouraged professionals to regard the relationship of educational theory to practice in a research based technicist or applied science way, and spawned the kind of competence programs of professional preparation which have lately overtaken teacher education.

But how plausible is it to regard the activity of teaching, even teaching considered as a skill, as an applied science or technology? While it would be rash to deny that there are technical aspects of teaching, or at least respects in which it may stand to be improved by systematization in the light of research, there are arguably other reasons for regarding any wholesale technicist conception of pedagogy as misleading and distortive. One recent influential objection to any such technicist model of teaching, hailing from what might be called “particularist” sources, stresses that teaching very rarely involves the application of general rules and is more often a matter of situation-specific attention to particular contingencies of professional engagement; from this perspective, teachers need to be equipped, either by academy or field experience, more with professional capacities for flexible context-sensitive reflection than general research-based techniques.⁵ This idea sits well with the further thought that teaching does not obviously seem to be a technical notion anyway; the most scientifically ignorant of children have often a fair idea of what teaching and learning mean, hardly anyone goes through life without doing substantial amounts of teaching — mostly without resort to scientific or technical training — and some of the greatest teachers who have ever lived, including Jesus and Socrates, seem to have managed without benefit of research-based theory.⁶ Moreover, the most technically systematic of teaching may be less than inspired, and there seems to be a creative or imaginative dimension to, or element in, teaching for which some show more flair than others.

Thus, wholly consonant with the insights of particularists, but going some way beyond them, emphasis on the pedagogical importance of creativity and imagination serves to reinforce an equally common conception of teaching as an *art* or craft more than a science or technology. Like the gifted musician who brings personal expression and interpretation to the piece he is playing, and unlike the musical hack who runs routinely through the same old changes, the good teacher is ever lively and inventive in his teaching and constantly seeks ways to avoid featureless classroom routine. A conception of pedagogy as more art than science does not, of course, preclude a *skill* construal of teaching as such, but it does raise fairly familiar difficulties for conceiving it in terms of the kind of skills that might be learned through formal instruction, notably in the academy. On the one hand, a particularist view of teaching skills as context-specific responses is liable to give hostages to the fortunes of those who claim that, since the art or craft of teaching rarely if ever involves the application of general rules and principles, it can only be learned via the hands-on school experience which renders college training largely redundant. On the other, the idea of teaching as an art which involves significant unequally distributed qualities of personality and verve serves to confirm the suspicions of

those who claim that good teachers are born more than made. Thus, though it would be hasty to conclude from this that we can as teacher trainers do *nothing* to improve the run of material with which we have to work, we have all met trainees, good and bad, for whom further instruction seems, for better or worse, more or less redundant.

PEDAGOGICAL VIRTUES AND THE MORAL DIMENSION

Clearly, however, it would be rash to pursue too far any analogy between artistic practice and teaching. Aside from the obvious limits of pedagogical originality and creativity, teachers have not the freedom of genuine artists to do as they like and their professional conduct is subject to constraints of moral, social and political accountability. Indeed, what obviously seems missing so far from technical and artistic conceptions of teaching — insofar as we are concerned to understand teaching as the professional promotion of education — is the *moral* dimension. It is not hard to envisage a charismatic demagogue combining his considerable personal skills of oratory and rhetoric with state of the art educational technology to bend the mob to his wicked will, and the indoctrinatory potential of this or that educational Jack or Jean Brodie is a familiar and ever present hazard in schools. Hence, it seems difficult to characterize teaching as an educational enterprise or endeavor exclusively in terms of technical, craft, or artistic skills without significant reference to the ethical or moral dimension — especially to attitudes and values. But why should this be a difficulty? Might we not now simply conceive teaching, as competence programs of teacher training appear to, as the practice of skills which have a moral dimension, or even as the practice of *moral skills* in addition to technical or craft skills?⁷

However, there are considerations which should incline us, if the main focus of our inquiry into teaching is upon the promotion of education, to resist any such line of argument. First, unlike a skill which is exercised or practiced *upon* something or someone, real education is arguably a more reciprocal or two way concern, something with more the human and moral quality of good relationship or conversation. Hence, in successful Socratic (sometimes called dialogical) contexts of teaching, teachers and learners are often supposed to be “partners” in the educational encounter. Thus, even if we want to retain an important role for skill in education, it may seem more accurate to characterize good teaching as a moral enterprise which can be conducted more or less skillfully, than as a skill which is practiced more or less morally. In the latter case, the primary focus on the skill dimension of education and teaching at best puts the conceptual cart before the horse. But second, the move from recognizing that teaching has a moral dimension to positing the existence of moral *skills* both can and should be resisted. It is of considerable interest here, indeed, not just that the trait of caring has recently been reaffirmed (in some reaction to a modern moral educational orthodoxy focused on the development of problem solving skills) as an important educational quality, but that a skill construal of caring is just what we earlier gave some reason to reject.⁸

But if we are not to call caring a skill, what are we to call it? At this point, we may be able to benefit from some possible convergence of recent educational-philosophical insights. For although the particularism previously mentioned is not always inconsistent with skill construals of pedagogy, some particularists, in

moving away from a causal generalization model of reflective practice, have been drawn to a characterization of teaching more in terms of Aristotle's *phronésis* than his notion of *techné*.⁹ On this view, the capacities required for good teaching are not so much externally imposed or adopted techniques as personal responses, and the sensibilities from which such responses spring are of a particular character-instantiable kind; in short, whereas the deliverances of *techné* are skills, the deliverances of *phronésis* are *virtues*, understood as reflective or evaluative *dispositions*. But, of course, it is *also* entirely natural, despite some less than propitious care-theoretical tendency to characterize caring as a quality at some odds with capacities for rational evaluation, to think of sensible caring as a moral virtue. Indeed, present observations can be sharpened to a finer point by recalling that a tradition of evaluating good teachers in terms of their possession of a range of pedagogical virtues — honesty, integrity, fairness, sympathy, care, open-mindedness, respect for others and so on — seems if anything more time-honored than the relatively recent social-scientific vogue for evaluating teacher effectiveness in skill terms.

TEACHING AND RIVAL TRADITIONS OF DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

However, the idea that there is a significant moral dimension to teaching and that the qualities of a good teacher are more apt for construal as virtues than skills has, I suspect, some further devastating and hitherto largely unsuspected consequences for any exclusively skill-based account of pedagogy. Indeed, it should now be familiar to educational philosophers that moral particularism has lately been pushed in a quite radical social-theoretical direction: that, in the course of resisting the moral universalisms of liberal theory, particularists of communitarian bent have radically relativized (without necessarily embracing relativism as such) moral value and virtue to sociocultural context. Moreover, Alasdair MacIntyre, a leading apostle of contemporary communitarianism, has in several places explicitly explored the implications of such thinking for education and pedagogy. Thus, in one place, MacIntyre has observed that the very possibility of a common education of the kind presupposed to the idea of an "educated public" is precluded by the value-fragmented social and cultural circumstances of modernity.¹⁰ In another, however, he has argued that since contemporary conceptions of virtue reflect culturally diverse moral inheritances there can be no "shared public morality of commonplace usage" of the kind envisaged by liberal-rational models of moral education (of, presumably, cognitive-developmental and other kinds).¹¹

But on the reasonable assumption that moral formation is integral to the role of any teacher *qua* educator, this would seem to have two unpropitious implications for any analysis of pedagogy which gives pride of place to the development of skills. First, there is the virtue-theoretical insight that since moral education is itself anyway modeled less well on the idea of skill mastery and better conceived in terms of the acquisition of value-driven attitudes and dispositions, it may also be wiser to construe moral pedagogy more in terms of personal virtuous example than skillful manipulation. The more serious second point, however, is that even if we *were* to conceive the promotion of moral virtues as a matter of the exercise of pedagogical skills, it is not clear, on a communitarian analysis which claims that there can be *no*

common perspective-neutral conception of moral development, that there could be any complementarily neutral conception of moral pedagogy. What follows at the very least from these observations is that there could be no scientifically grounded research-based conception of moral pedagogy of the kind which usually seems to be envisaged by advocates of competence models of professional teacher training

It is possible, of course, that some question-begging might be suspected at this point. Is not my present calling into question of the very idea of a value-free conception of development, on the grounds that aims of *education* are morally contestable, at some odds with my earlier insistence that teaching is conceptually *distinct* from education more broadly construed (as personal emancipation or whatever)? Why could we not accept that although such aspects of the curriculum as moral, religious, and political education are value-laden and deeply contestable, many if not most other areas of the curriculum cause no such difficulties. If private piano teachers or gymnastics coaches can, unencumbered by the burdens of moral formation, be judged skillful or otherwise in promoting certain performance skills (according to some reasonably straightforward conception of gymnastic or pianistic development) why cannot a school teacher of science, mathematics, or art strive for skillful adherence to some relatively uncontested notion of scientific, mathematical or artistic development? I suspect, however, that the persuasiveness of any such view is entirely exhausted by the (limited) plausibility of a value-neutral learning-theoretical (“psychomotor”) model of the mastery of skills of physical performance. On more robust cognitive-developmental accounts of learning, knowledge, and understanding in science, art, or mathematics, matters appear distinctly more problematic.

WIDER CURRICULUM IMPLICATIONS OF RIVAL ACCOUNTS OF DEVELOPMENT

First, analytical philosophers of education have long complained that the educationally familiar cognitive accounts of Jean Piaget and his followers are a curious hybrid of biology, psychology, and *epistemology*, and that any mapping of cognitive development must needs be an inherently *normative* exploration of the possibilities of human experiential intelligibility.¹² But however unproblematic the entry of epistemological considerations into the developmental story may have seemed to such structuralist pioneers of cognitive psychology as Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, seeking in their neo-Kantian way to trace the essential culturally invariant form of human mental growth, they cannot be but extremely problematic in a present day philosophical climate of little or no widespread Kantian faith in the foundational role of epistemology. Indeed, radical postmodern skepticism aside, it seems clear enough that epistemology is implicated in serious questions in the theory of meaning, and that large controversies continue to rage — as they have since the Greeks first raised them — over the precise logical status of quite basic idioms of scientific, artistic, historical and other inquiry. In the sphere of personal development (as elsewhere), epistemology also has significant *ontological* implications. Personal development is a function not only of genetic endowment but also of culturally conditioned knowledge and belief, and particular understandings of scientific inquiry, artistic creativity, and historical veracity — as much as moral

virtue — will vary in accordance with this or that epistemic inheritance. Moreover, we should not speak as though forms of scientific, artistic and historical understanding may be separated from moral concerns; for, it hardly needs saying, different conceptions of science, art, and history can have significantly diverse implications for moral formation and response.

Hence, I believe that the implications of a rival conceptions view of moral education, that since there is no one conception of moral development there can be no common conception of moral pedagogy, are quite generalizable to other aspects of education and teaching (and, indeed, I suspect that closer scrutiny of such less “educational” conceptions of teaching as coaching would disclose that they are prey to similar considerations). We also need, of course, to be clear how deep such considerations go. The present claim, for example, is not that there can be *no* pedagogical skills, only that since such skills are internally related to different conceptions of educational development, teaching cannot be reduced to value-neutral cross-perspectival professional skills of the kind often envisaged on competence models of professional teacher training. But we should all the same beware of any temptation to embrace a radical cultural *relativism* about human development and pedagogy as such, since any such relativism must threaten the very possibility of general professional discourse and debate about educational methodology. It is from this point of view, of course, that MacIntyre’s educational essays are deeply unsettling, since they seem to suggest that there is nowadays no common conception of education, of “an educated public” at which teachers might aim, and which could therefore provide a goal for the development of professional expertise.

But since MacIntyre explicitly defends a notion of objective truth, it is anyway hard to interpret his thesis as an expression of relativism as such, and recognition of the conceptual possibility of a common education seems actually *presupposed* rather than denied by his claim that such a conception has lately been overtaken by the fragmented discourses of professional specialism. It is therefore probably best to construe his educated public essay as a sociological thesis about how things have modernly (or postmodernly) turned out, and his essay on virtue education as a normative thesis about what is or is not moral educationally permissible in the light of contemporary developments. And, of course, these points may well be such as to compel rather than preclude wider principled debate and discussion about educational aims and methods in professional teacher training. Indeed, a non-relativistic interpretation of a rival tradition’s conception of human enquiry, coupled with a “particularistic” recognition of the situation-specific character of teaching skills, may well point to the broader conception of professional educational enquiry which seems precisely precluded by narrower competence-based conceptions.

CONCLUSION

In the last analysis, however, I believe that although there certainly are pedagogical skills, teaching just as certainly cannot be *reduced* to such skills. Indeed, I suspect that the skill card has lately been greatly overplayed in professional educational circles (not least perhaps by academic teacher trainers anxious to prove that they have something of pedagogical substance to offer to teaching trainees), and

that the mastery of much that is worth calling skills plays a relatively small part in any mature understanding of effective teaching. First, with particular regard to the pedagogical *techné* which seems to have assumed such prominence in the deliberations of contemporary competence mongers, though it is doubtless advantageous for teachers to acquire some general organizational strategies for modern classroom management, it is unlikely that there is much beyond this for which we might have resort to scientific research. Moreover, although it may take a bit of practice to learn to write steadily and clearly on a blackboard, it is surely a bit pretentious to label as skills many if not most of the acquired techniques and strategies teachers will sometimes be required to exercise in the classroom.

I suspect that a rather better case for the place of skills in education and teaching is to be made by construing the performative aspects of teaching, especially those of communication and personal relationship, in the particularistic terms of artistic or craft engagement rather than scientific or technical engineering and management. But this, of course, may be to transpose such aspects of teaching altogether from the key of *techné* or skill to that of *phronésis* or virtue. I suspect, for example, that despite contemporary attempts to understand aspects of educational authority and classroom discipline in terms of some sort of managerial *techné*, these are perhaps ultimately better understood in the context-specific terms of moral relationship for which appropriate resources of personality and character are pivotal. This raises the difficulty for professional teacher educators, of course, that capacities of this kind are often more effectively developed in the field than in the academy. On the other hand, if we can but clear our heads of current professional obsession with pedagogic skills, we may come to recognize that the really deep professional challenges of education and teaching are implicated in a web of complex intellectual, moral and normative questions which must certainly exhaust any training in mere *techné*.

1. See David Carr: "The Dichotomy of Liberal versus Vocational Education: Some Basic Conceptual Geography," in *Philosophy of Education 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996), 53-63.

2. For an illuminating recent addition to the critical literature on skills in education, see Steven Johnson, "Skills, Socrates, and the Sophists: Learning from History," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 46, no. 2 (1998): 201-14; and for useful critique of competency models of teaching, see Terry Hyland, "Competence, Knowledge, and Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 27, no. 1 (1993): 57-68.

3. See Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), book 6, sect. 4.

4. On this, see Leslie Perry, *Four Progressive Educators* (London: Collier-Macmillan, Educational Thinkers Series, 1967).

5. For one such "particularist" approach, see Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: "Phronesis" and "Techné" in Modern Philosophy and in Aristotle* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

6. Many of these points are eloquently made in John Passmore's splendid work, *The Philosophy of Teaching* (London: Duckworth, 1980).

7. For the dubious idea of moral competencies, see David Bridges, "Competence-based Education and Training: Progress or Villainy?" *Journal of the Philosophy of Education* 30, no. 3 (1996): 361-75.

8. The most influential educational application of the "ethics of care" is to be found, of course, in Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminist Approach to Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

9. Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground*, 1993.

10. Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Idea of an Educated Public," in *Education and Values: The Richard Peters Lectures*, ed. Graham Haydon (London: Institute of Education, University of London, 1987).

11. Alasdair MacIntyre, *How to Appear Virtuous without Actually Being So* (Lancaster, U.K.: University of Lancaster Centre for the Study of Cultural Values, 1991).

12. See, for example, David Hamlyn, *Experience and the Growth of Understanding* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).