

Teaching and its Traditions

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What practice is subject to more unsolicited advice and criticism than teaching? The ceaseless promotion of “new ideas” to improve what teachers do is a fact of life in the field. So too is the dismissive chorus of spectators, not least those exhibiting the characteristics Richard Rorty has recently criticized, scholars supplanting hopeful engagement with a kind of knowing, disdainful commentary.¹

Both of these orientations tend to lord it over teachers and the work they do. David Hansen, characteristically, avoids such temptations here. He does not assume some theoretical stance outside and above practice from which to view and/or try to manipulate the work of teachers. Rather, his gesture is to the practice itself. As Joseph Dunne puts it in advocating practical philosophy of this kind:

The good exists (as several traditions tell us) in hidden places, in lives of unrecorded heroism. Insofar as it gains a reliably public space, however, it does so through specific practices in which people cooperate toward shared ends, the achievement of which helps to form their characters but which they themselves must continue to define.²

Seeking the good in teaching means taking the work and practical judgment of teachers seriously and, since the moral underpinnings of that work are embedded in a historically evolving practice, encouraging teachers to embrace and explore the tradition of which they are part.

How can one say anything meaningful about the practice of teaching without reducing it in some way? Hansen’s account sidesteps the problem by way of an equivocation concerning two senses of teaching. On the one hand, he alludes to teaching in the generously inclusive, though vague, sense in which teachers are engaged in service to others, “helping students to grow intellectually and morally.” What self-identified teacher would not belong? On the other hand, the essay elaborates a view of teaching having very distinct, and consistently positive, characteristics, associated with a strong sense of practice. This is the practice that “may” be realized by “serious-minded teachers,” especially with the right kinds of encouragement. It is a practice intent neither on achieving narrow, instrumentally conceived ends, nor on socializing or otherwise preparing students for something to come later. Rather, it is centered on meaningful, elevating engagement in the present, both among those involved together and, judging from the discussion of Harold Bloom and Hans-Georg Gadamer, the tradition-bound texts they encounter.

The essay invites us to think about the strong sense of practice, while holding all teachers in mind. The suggestive appeal of the strong sense carries the weight. In my own experience, it calls to mind how, for example, over a period of several years I have learned something of what it means to read Plato’s *Republic* with students. It has taken time to get beyond the temptation to read the text in order to make certain points—say, to warn about the “noble lie” and hierarchy in education—for which it once seemed merely useful. The long tradition of thinking with and through such a

text can be deeply satisfying for all concerned once narrower, more strictly instrumental purposes are checked. Or to take a different example, consider a teacher in one of Andre Dubus's last stories, "Woman on a Plane," who reads poems in the evening, thinking

of what she would say about them next day in class. She knew that she could not plan everything she would say; she could only plan how she would begin. It was a matter of letting go in front of the students, and waiting for the light to come. The light would come with images and words she must not hold before class. Her holding of them could take away the life they drew from revelation, turn them into dead objects she possessed and carried with her to show the students. She knew that teaching a poem was like writing a poem: she could only begin, and reach, and wait. If she tried to impose a design to save herself from failure, there would be no revelation on the page, or with her students. Before each class she was afraid, but it was muted, and she knew it kept her from being dull and removed.³

This teacher exemplifies commitment to what I take to be Hansen's strong sense of practice, its orientation toward "intellectual and moral ascension...expanding...the horizons of thought and conduct." Such a practice is clearly threatened, as Hansen points out, by external pressures and incursions of various, sometimes well-meaning, kinds. Teachers need to be able to counter various strands of reductionist discourse about their work, and cultivating a sense of tradition does, I think, contribute to this ongoing task of practical self-defense.

At the same time, inside the broader parameters of teaching, teachers who currently are not well-moored in the strong sense of practice also represent a threat. The danger here for Hansen seems to be of practitioners adrift, and thus more vulnerable to external, instrumentalist intrusions of all kinds into teaching. And thus, one gathers, the way to resolve the difference between the two senses of teaching Hansen presents is to help ever more teachers see more clearly the tradition of which they are part, and the good it helps them to realize in themselves and through their work.

How convincing is this attempt to reconcile the two senses of teaching? The answer depends on whether one is persuaded that serious-minded teachers gravitate in practice toward moral and intellectual growth in understanding, the depths and heights of which are expanded by thoughtful immersion in, and cultivating a sense of, the practice and its tradition. Some teachers certainly do. But, it seems to me, other teachers are engaged in fundamentally different ways. From the earliest scribes, for example, many teachers have focused on conveying stored information and the skills necessary to manipulate it. Other teachers have sought above all to refine the expertise, sensibilities, and habits required of members in every sort of vocation and privileged order, from courtiers and clerics to cutting-edge disciplinary specialists. And across the generations, many teachers have been and are intent to this day on socializing students in more general ways, managing the young in schools reflecting current configurations of power, beliefs, and moral conventions. These and other traditions of practice clearly provide participants a sense of identity in teaching as well, though they do not share the precursors, the taste for open-ended inquiry, or the pursuit of depths and heights of non-instrumental understanding Hansen identifies with the practice of teaching itself. Teachers, taken as a whole, are promiscuous in the goods they seek. And so we might better say that the practice of

teaching, like the practice of religion or of politics, is a kind of shorthand term for a rough confederation of practices, embedded in a tangle of diverse traditions. Think, for example, of what takes place under the name of teaching at a modern university.

For teaching, broadly construed, the question is how particular traditions of practice gain momentum or slide into obscurity. While external factors loom large, teacher conceptions of practice are undeniably important as well. There is nothing new in this of course, but it points up a shortcoming tied to the equivocation in Hansen's essay. For the wish, on the one hand, to embrace teaching broadly undercuts efforts to ground a preference for a particular tradition of practice over and above others within the uneasy confederation of teaching. While the desire, on the other hand, to shine a bright light on a particular tradition of practice casts much of what many committed teachers do into the shadows.

The equivocation serves also to bolster, problematically, Hansen's optimistic rendering of teaching viewed as a whole. As Richard Bernstein comments, "[t]here is a danger...of a type of romanticism where we are tempted to think of a tradition as something which is intrinsically good...Do we not have to recognize that there have been vital traditions that have been used to legitimate the moral inferiority of the poor, women, and minorities?"⁴ Even if the strong sense of practice Hansen presents is free of such by-products — a highly contestable point — teaching more broadly construed is not. In preparing scribes, experts, and well-socialized youth for every kind of social order, and in representing every kind of social order themselves, practicing teachers have done their share in contributing to evil, delivering socially sanctioned harms to individuals and to despised groups of many kinds. The danger of a broadly tradition-affirming approach to teaching is that, in the name of embracing the genuine good realized in some identifiable strands of teaching, we divert our eyes from the dubious goods, and even outright harms, associated with other living traditions of practice.

Sharing, as I believe I do, Hansen's commitment to the strong sense of practice he brings into view, I find myself wondering what its prospects are. Why should we not expect that various kinds of narrow, controlling, power-preserving, instrumentally oriented teaching would more likely prevail—especially in the institutional context, the "grammar of schooling," that shapes perceptions of what a "real school" is and how teachers conduct their work?⁵ This suggests to me the need to be clearer about the context of competing practices of teaching. What larger moral and political traditions align with the practice of teaching we prefer? What resources in these linked traditions should we strive to make more explicit and encourage teachers to draw upon in order to see certain traditions of practice flourish, while doing what we can so that others might lose their grip?

1. Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

2. Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 380.

3. Andre Dubus, "Woman on a Plane," in Andre Dubus, *Dancing After Dark* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 98-99.
4. Richard Bernstein, "Nietzsche or Aristotle?" in Richard Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 134.
5. See David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).