

Can Hypocrites Be Good Teachers?

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Salman Rushdie wrote an essay “Is Nothing Sacred?” in which he searched for permanence in a world of change.¹ Robert Orton seems to have the same concern in matters educational. He desires to find or establish criteria that will hold amidst the plethora of whims of every fashionable trend “that promises a new fix for student learning.” The permanence Orton recommends is to be obtained through a Hippocratic Oath for teachers: “Act in a way to help students learn by whatever conception of student learning that you believe in.” This categorical imperative is clarified in terms of how teachers are autonomous in the task of making a “connection between teacher beliefs and student learning.”

Jacques Barzun urges that we “forget education. Education is a result, a slow growth, and hard to judge. Let us talk rather about teaching and learning, a joint activity.”² Much in the same spirit, Orton directs our attention to the importance of teachers respecting students as persons. This commitment by teachers, however, is possible regardless of what teaching method, style, strategy, or approach is used. Given this, one wonders why Orton took us through his three teaching/learning models without alluding to, let alone acknowledging, the numerous other alternatives.³

But, with a few notable exceptions, wondering is harmless and of no great consequence. On the contrary, there is more than wonderment associated with Orton’s clear and repeated “*whatever* conception of student learning that the teacher believes in.” Apparently, as long as teachers truly implement their conception of student learning — not being hypocrites or weak-willed — then there will be a significantly high likelihood of student learning. In fact, Orton implies that *only* if the Hippocratic Oath for teachers is kept is there a chance for student learning.

In Dickens’s *Hard Times*, Thomas Gradgrind extols: “What I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else.” And as we all know, Gradgrind consistently taught from his conception of student learning. Therefore, we seem obligated to conclude — given Orton’s thesis — that Gradgrind respected his students and under his tutelage they had quality educational experiences. I, for one, cannot concur and would hope that Orton shares my judgment of Gradgrind’s conception of student learning.⁴ Yet it is not obvious that he can do so without giving up his thesis.

Many of those who are critical of Gradgrind’s conception of student learning concentrate on the lack of respect for the student as a person. On the importance of teachers respecting students, there is no quarrel with Orton. Yet, while it is one thing to argue that common to all poor teaching/learning is the lack of respect for students, it is quite another thing to conclude that by (merely) respecting the students — as evidenced by teaching according to one’s conception of student learning — that

good teaching/learning will occur. Or, in more formal terms, while the absence of teachers' respect for students can be seen as a sufficient condition for poor teaching/learning, the presence of respect is only a necessary condition for good teaching/learning. Orton appears to treat teachers' respect for students as both a necessary and sufficient condition for the likelihood of quality student learning.

And what of the students' perspectives on the teaching/learning process? Jerome Bruner, in *The Process of Education*, relates the story of a distinguished physics professor who reports introducing an advanced class to quantum theory: "I went through it once and looked up only to find the class full of blank faces — they had obviously not understood. I went through it a second time, and they still did not understand it. And so I went through it a third time, and that time *I* understood it."⁵

I suggest that an equally insightful story could have had the third try resulting in, "and that time I did *not* understand it." For teachers to put themselves into the students' state of mind would assuredly leave the teachers with far less, if not a different understanding than previously commanded. No teacher who honestly desires to help students learn can seriously believe that success is possible regardless of what students bring to the learning opportunity and irrespective of how students interpret new material. Granting this, it would seem that the better understanding teachers have of the manner in which students learn, and more important, the reasons for their not understanding, not learning, the better equipped teachers will be to achieve their goal of student learning.⁶ Yet Orton totally neglects any consideration of what students might do or not do in response to teachers who are steadfast in their devotion to their conception of student learning.

Finally, Orton joins the number of those who suggest certain parallels between teaching and doctoring.⁷ Yet his primary concentration is directed to the assumptions behind and implications of the Hippocratic Oath — an oath he judges Dr. Kevorkian has consistently broken, thereby violating the rights of the patients. However, others have argued that the only way one can care for and truly respect patients as persons is by being empathic and by taking their reasoned pleas seriously. Accordingly, if by acting appropriately (as just characterized) one breaks the Hippocratic Oath, what better evidence is there for the faultiness of such an oath? In other words, sensible arguments have been made that being a slave to the Hippocratic Oath can prevent one from acting in the best interest of one's patients.

I maintain that much the same can be said regarding the constancy of, the fidelity to, one's conception of student learning. Perhaps there are situations in which students, or even one student, would profit most, would learn more, by some means other than those authorized by one's cherished conception of student learning.

But before I develop this possibility, I want to erase any impression that I link one's stance on physician-assisted suicide with one's position on student learning. That done, I recommend that concerted attention be given to those qualities that go into making a good doctor/teacher, while suspending the issue of the Hippocratic Oath. Kenneth Sirotnik details five ethical roots of teaching: inquiry, knowledge, competence, caring, and social justice;⁸ and James Drane offers six virtues of good doctoring: benevolence, truthfulness, respect, friendliness, justice, and reverence.⁹

Perhaps this is where we should be looking for a center that holds, for a permanence amidst a welter of change, rather than seeking some sacred lodestone beneath the gravel of the profane.

Can hypocrites be good teachers? Certainly — just as likely as those who devoutly follow their conception of student learning can be poor teachers. But this is not where our concerns should lie. Rather, we should take our direction from Salman Rushdie's insight that "nothing is sacred in and of itself." Not the Hippocratic Oath, not some absolute principle, and certainly not an educational imperative that denies or ignores the uniqueness of situations and, most important, the uniqueness of each student's own conception of learning.¹⁰

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1. Salman Rushdie, "Is Nothing Sacred?" *Granta* 31 (Spring 1990): 98-111.
 2. Jacques Barzun, *Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3.
 3. Cf., H.S. Broudy, "Didactics, Heuristics, and Philetics," *Educational Theory* 22, no. 3 (Summer 1972): 251-61; Israel Scheffler, "Philosophical Models of Teaching," *Harvard Educational Review* 35, no. 2 (May 1965): 131-43.
 4. Cf. Howard Gardner, *To Open Minds: Chinese Clues to the Dilemma of Contemporary Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).
 5. Jerome S. Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 88-89.
 6. As David Nyberg argues, the teacher-student relationship is "active, concrete, and personal. The first step is to find out what the student's viewpoint is, and to incorporate it somehow. Teachers need to know what is on the student's mind, not just when there is a problem, but at all other times as well." From "The Basis of Respect is Empathy," in *Philosophy of Education* 1991, ed. Margret Buchmann and Robert E. Floden (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992), 200.
 7. Roger Soder, "The Rhetoric of Teacher Professionalization" and Gary D. Fenstermacher, "Some Moral Considerations on Teaching as a Profession," in *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching*, ed. John I. Goodlad, Roger Soder, and Kenneth A. Sirotnik (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990); cf. Bruce B. Suttle's review, *Teaching Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (June 1991): 234-36.
 8. Kenneth A. Sirotnik, "Society, Schooling, Teaching, and Preparing to Teach," in *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching*, 296-327.
 9. James F. Drane, *Becoming a Good Doctor: The Place of Virtue and Character in Medical Ethics* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1988).
 10. Cf. Sidney Hook, "The Good Teacher," chap. 10 of *Education for Modern Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963); Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Brand Blanshard, "What is Education For?" chap. 5 of *The Uses of a Liberal Education* (Lasalle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1973).