

Real Teaching

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There used to be a game show on television some years back whose format was as simple and straightforward as it was entertaining. The show's panelists – four “TV personalities” as they are usually called – were introduced to successive trios of strangers, each made up of one person who worked at some unusual occupation, such as taming lions or cutting diamonds, plus two others of the same sex and supposedly the same name who claimed to be similarly employed but were actually imposters. The point of the game was to identify the honest member of each trio by asking all three of them questions about the line of work in which they claimed to be engaged. When the time limit for questions had been reached and each of the contestants had made a guess as to which of the three was telling the truth, the show's announcer would call upon the *real* Mister or Miss So-and-So to stand and be identified. Cries of surprise, followed by laughter and applause, crowned the departure of each trio of contestants.

That once popular show, called “To Tell the Truth,” invariably comes to mind whenever my thoughts turn to the question of what teaching is like as an occupation and how it might be defined. It does so because the show's format reminds me

of an experience I had some time ago as a newly appointed principal of a nursery school. That experience is itself worth describing in some detail, for it introduces in a rather dramatic if lighthearted way the questions to be examined in this chapter.

I was a newcomer to both school administration and nursery schools at the time. Consequently, in order to familiarize myself with the institution and how its teachers behaved I spent as much time as I could during my first few weeks on the job poking about the school as a complete stranger might, watching what was going on and trying to get a feel for the place. The teachers, who wanted to get to know me as much as I did them, warmly welcomed me to their classrooms. Their doing so made the experience as enjoyable as it was informative.

As the days wore on I slowly became aware of certain things the teachers did that distinguished them from the kinds of teachers I had spent most time with in the past – those with much older pupils. For example, I noticed that when nursery school teachers spoke to individual children or listened to what they had to say they first descended to the child's height by bending at the knees until their faces were on a level with the child's own. At the

same time, I was bemused to note, when I myself spoke or listened to a child I tended to bend at the *waist* rather than the knees. As a result, I hovered above the tyke like some huge crane, causing him or her to gaze skyward and, if out of doors on a bright day, to shade the eyes while doing so.

I noticed also that when reading to pupils the nursery school teachers did something else both odd and amusing. They propped the books they were reading on their laps with the open pages facing the students. The reason for doing so was obviously to allow the children to see the book's illustrations. But what made such a natural thing so amusing to me was that it required the teachers to develop the knack of reading upside down!

These and other examples of what seemed to me to be characteristic behavior of nursery school teachers so intrigued me that I decided to share my discoveries with the teachers themselves. I thought it possible they might add to my store of examples. I also expected them to be mildly amused by my report on the outcome of my observations.

Broaching the topic over lunch one day, I rather casually announced that it seemed as though my observations around school were beginning to pay off. "I think I'm beginning to catch on to a few of the tricks of your trade," I began. "For example, I've noticed that when you teachers . . ." and then I described a few of the things I had seen, mimicking postures and gestures in a somewhat exaggerated way, just to add to the fun. I concluded by claiming that should the chance ever occur to pass myself off as a nursery school teacher, I now thought I knew enough to be easily mistaken for the real McCoy.

My mimicking of their behavior amused the teachers, as I had thought it would, and so did my boast at the end. But the latter, rather surprisingly, turned out to be more than simply amusing. It triggered a discussion that went on far past lunch, one that we returned to on several occasions in the ensuing months. The focus of that recurrent discussion was whether I or anyone else could indeed get away with impersonating a teacher without ever being found out and what it would mean, insofar as teaching is concerned, if that were to happen.

The teachers could easily imagine a person getting away with such a pretense for quite some time. They even conceded that I might succeed in doing it myself for a while. But the notion of someone pretending to be a nursery school teacher and *never* getting caught, was a condition they found puzzling.

For if the person were never found out, they reasoned, shouldn't we at some point stop thinking of him or her as an imposter, even though this knowledge remains his or her own secret? Indeed, should the 'teacher' not at some point stop thinking of himself or herself that way? In short, when does the successful imposter actually become the real McCoy, or does that never happen? If not, why not?

A closely related question that we also discussed was whether the imposter had only to *behave* like a nursery school teacher in order to carry off the deception or whether there was more to it than that. Some of the teachers thought it would be necessary for the imposter to *think* like a nursery school teacher in order to *behave* like one. But that introduced the question of what it meant to think like a teacher. How does a nursery school teacher think?

The teachers and I went round and round in our discussions of these and other questions about teaching, all stimulated by my casual and, as I thought at the time, humorous observation that it might be possible to get by as a nursery school teacher without any formal training whatsoever. From that starting point, we soon discovered, the paths of speculation fan out in many directions. Can one determine whether a teacher is genuine or a fake (or good rather than bad) simply by watching her or him? Can teaching be defined behaviorally? What does it mean to say that teaching in general or good teaching in particular can be defined in any way at all? Where might such a definition come from? Is it something discovered or decided upon? If the former, how is that accomplished? If the latter, who does the deciding? And so on.

As could be guessed, the teachers and I never did succeed in answering most of the questions we so enthusiastically and, I fear, naively wrestled with back then. Nor have I yet done so. But both individually and collectively we did develop some tentative notions about the directions in which a few of the answers might lie. For me at least, several of those tentative notions have since become convictions.

What are they? Insofar as they relate to the topic of this chapter, my convictions are three in number. The first says there is no such thing as a behavioral definition of teaching and there never can be. We can never simply watch a person in action and be sure that something called teaching is going on. The second, closely related to the first, says that our attempt to say when a person is or is not teaching is always an act of interpretation. We are forever "readers" of human action, seeking to determine

which "reading" is correct from among those possible. The third conviction, one that follows on the heels of the first two, denies the possibility of our ever arriving upon an enduring definition of what it means to teach. In the remainder of this chapter each of those propositions will be treated in turn.

I

To begin, let's return to my early days as a nursery school principal, wandering from class to class in order to learn what nursery school teaching was all about. Picture my going about that task. Do you imagine I was very puzzled about when a teacher was or was not teaching? I assure you I was not.

As I moved from one room to another I *saw* with my own eyes teachers teaching and I did not for a moment doubt my judgment. [. . .]

The notion that teaching is what teachers can be seen doing seems sensible enough as an observational guide. There are limits to such a principle, of course, but everyone seems to know what they are. For example, if the teacher stops to tie his shoes or take off his jacket, or if he steps out in the hall for a drink of water, most people would not think of describing such actions as instances of teaching behavior. Thus it is tacitly assumed by most observers that not *everything* a teacher does while on the job is classifiable as teaching, though *most* of it probably will be. Many of the actions to be excluded are easily agreed upon.

A somewhat more difficult distinction is called for by the teacher who is standing in front of the class with his or her arms folded, waiting for the noise to abate. Is she or he at that instant teaching or merely getting ready to teach? And what about the teacher who is monitoring seatwork or marking papers? Should those activities be counted as part of teaching as well?

Judgments about such matters seem to depend, in part, on why the teacher in question is being observed in the first place. A supervisor of student teachers, for example, might find it very important to comment on the way a trainee prepared the class for instruction. From his or her point of view, standing in front of the class with arms folded is very much part of a teacher's repertoire of attention-getting devices and therefore is definitely an aspect of teaching worthy of comment.

Contrast that situation with someone doing research on teaching via an observational device

focusing exclusively on teacher-pupil interaction. Under those circumstances, coding would begin when instruction was actually underway. Until then, from the researcher's point of view, teaching had not yet begun.

These examples point to a well-known truth, that some of a teacher's actions are easier to classify as instances of teaching than are others. When a teacher is explaining something to students or demonstrating a skill that is later to be imitated, who can doubt that at that instant teaching is underway? Similarly, when teachers are listening to students or watching what they do, there seems little or no ambiguity about whether or not they are actually teaching.

It is when the interactions between teachers and students do not obviously bear upon what is to be learned that the greatest uncertainty arises. But even these ambiguous instances are often resolvable once the observer's purposes are known. What aspects of a teacher's behavior are to be counted as instances of teaching is a question whose answer depends on prior considerations having to do with the circumstances under which the question is raised in the first place.

An additional distinction related to how to talk about teaching introduces an argument with an interesting history in education and in philosophy as well. It has to do with whether we should keep separate the idea of teaching as an accomplishment from that of teaching as an effort, an attempt to do something.¹

One way of managing this dispute would be to limit the use of the term "teaching" to its sense as something that has been accomplished. This would require that we insist on evidence that learning has occurred before we can acknowledge that teaching has occurred. John Dewey, for one, seems to have something like this in mind when he tells his readers that,

Teaching may be compared to selling commodities. No one can sell unless someone else buys. We should ridicule a merchant who said that he had sold a great many of goods although no one had bought any. But perhaps there are teachers who think that they have done a good day's teaching irrespective of what pupils have learned. There is the same exact equation between teaching and learning that there is between selling and buying.²

Were we to take Dewey seriously on this point, it would affect the way we discussed what we saw when we observed teachers in action. The discovery that

the students we had observed had learned nothing from their teacher would force us to acknowledge that the teacher had not been teaching, no matter what she might have appeared to be doing when we observed her. She may have been *trying* to teach, we might readily admit, but she wasn't actually teaching.

Under certain circumstances it makes good sense to restrict the use of the term in this way. It does so when it comes to what we would like to say about the activity, especially when we speak of teaching in the past tense. To say that Jones taught Smith how to swim but Smith learned nothing whatsoever about the sport does sound a bit peculiar, if not downright contradictory. It makes us want to counter with, "Well then, Jones didn't *really* teach Smith how to swim."

But note that if we insist upon this necessary connection between teaching and learning we then find it impossible to say with certainty that a person is teaching until after the fact — until evidence that learning has occurred is in hand. Lacking such evidence, all we can say as we watch teachers in action is that they *look* as though they are teaching, or perhaps, "They are definitely trying to teach." To put the matter somewhat differently, by too strict an insistence on the teaching-learning connection we automatically rule out the possibility of unsuccessful teaching.

To qualify as an instance of teaching, if a teacher's actions *must* result in learning, then we are left with the question of what to call the same set of actions when such a result is not forthcoming. They can't be called instances of teaching that didn't work, for we have just ruled out that possibility. Treating them as "tries," rather than "successes," allows us to declare that the teacher has tried to teach, which may be quite enough to say in many circumstances. Indeed, it could be that in everyday affairs that's what most people mean when they use the term. When we say, "Look, there's a person teaching," what we mean is, "There's a person trying to teach." The "trying to" is understood. Its omission is simply a kind of verbal shorthand.

To short-circuit an argument that seems to get more and more picayune as it goes along, most people would probably be content to have the phrase "trying to" tacked on to their descriptions of teachers in action wherever the word "teaching" appears. The cost of such a grammatical change seems a small price to pay for avoiding what could be an interminable debate. But note that by

inserting such a qualifier in our speech we do not manage to sidestep the problem entirely. Indeed, we simply carry it with us. We may no longer face the question of how we know when a person is teaching, but we now must ask how we know when a person is *trying* to teach.

II

We can answer that question with confidence, it would seem, in only one of two ways. Either we must have some prior knowledge of what trying to teach looks like, or we must trust the testimony of the person who says that is what he or she is doing. Let's look at the first possibility a little more carefully.

How did I know that the teachers I witnessed in the nursery school were trying to teach? Perhaps I possessed at the time some idea of what "trying to teach" looks like in general. The rest is simply a matter of matching the teachers observed with that prior conception. In other words, because those teachers were behaving in ways I recognized as being "teacherly," I confidently concluded that they were trying to teach. Is that the way my sense of recognition worked?

Something like that process must surely have been in operation, no doubt, but is it sufficient to explain my feeling of confidence? I think not. To understand why, consider the following situation.

A visitor to a school peeks through the window of a classroom door and sees a woman with chalk in hand standing before a group of approximately twenty-five young people seated at desks. The woman is gesturing toward a mathematical formula written on the blackboard. The visitor naturally concludes that he is witnessing a class in session; he is corrected by the principal, who happens by with the news that what is going on in that room is not a class at all but rather a rehearsal of a scene from the play *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, which the local drama society is putting on in a few days.

What does such an unlikely turn of events tell us about the problem of identifying an instance of someone trying to teach? Obviously, the observer who thinks he knows an act of teaching when he sees it can be fooled. People can pretend to teach. The whole scene can be make-believe. That rarely happens, of course, but it *could* happen and that's the important point. In other words, the identification of teaching can never be made on visual evidence

alone. Something else is required, something having to do with the genuineness of the total situation.

Recall that when the hypothetical questioner asked why I was so confident in my judgment, I began by saying that I knew this was a school and these were classrooms and those people teachers and those students. I was confident, in other words, that I was not walking around a movie set, witnessing the filming of *Up the Down Staircase* or something like that.

There was even a touch of impatience in my answer, for my imaginary interrogator seemed to question the obvious. But my answer showed that my sense of confidence very much depended on a host of half-buried assumptions, beginning with the few I have mentioned and including many others as well.

Not only did I know what schools and classrooms and teachers were like, being able to recognize them on sight, and trusting my conviction that I was witnessing the real McCoy, but I also knew a reasonable amount about the ends those objects were designed to serve (or prepared to fulfill, as we would say of teachers themselves). I further knew something about their historical development, their political and social significance, and so on. In other words, the events I was witnessing were embedded within a cultural and historical context of which I was only partially conscious at the time, but one that infused them with meaning, all the same. That gave me confidence that I was witnessing an instance of teaching and not something else. Without that background of tacit understanding my feeling of confidence could never have arisen.

[...]

The point to be noted is that teaching, like most other human actions, is not so much "seen" as it is "read." In other words, though we may feel that what we are witnessing in classrooms is as plain as the nose on our face (as I did during my wanderings about the nursery school), we feel that way thanks to the largely unconscious operation of a vast apparatus of understanding that we seldom bother to bring to the surface of awareness for close scrutiny.³

[...] is there anything like a pedagogical outlook on things, a "teacherly" way of viewing the world?⁴

When we recognize the great variety of teachers the world over, it is hard to imagine that such a diverse group might be bound together by any single perspective on their work, an outlook that would characterize them all. At the same time, by staying at a rather low level of generalization and by

focusing on perception alone, we can observe distinctions between the ways "experts" and "laymen" look at things that would seem to hold true for the difference between teachers and nonteachers as well.

For example, other things being equal, we might expect the expert's view to be more differentiated than that of the layman. We would expect him or her to have a "finer" than ordinary perception of the object of his expertise, to see it in greater detail. We would also expect such a person to have a "quicker" vision as well, to be able to take in a lot of information at a glance, homing in quickly on features worthy of special attention. We would expect the expert to have an eye for irregularities and trouble spots. We would also expect him to see opportunities missed by others. He or she would be expected to be more "future-oriented," to see possibilities where others see none.

We would also expect the expert to see things in perspective, to know, for example, whether to treat something with alarm or more routinely. In other words, we would not expect the expert to get "rattled" by the unexpected quite as easily as might the layman. In sum, we normally expect the expert to be more thoughtful than the nonexpert about things, not in the sense of thinking *more*, but rather in the sense of thinking *differently*. Moreover, this thoughtfulness can be reflected in a variety of ways.

As applied to teachers and teaching, this set of expectations yields an image of the seasoned teacher that distinguishes him or her, at least in principle, from laymen in general and possibly even from novice teachers. Expert teachers "see more" than do nonexperts. They are alive to the latent pedagogical possibilities in the events they witness. Within a classroom setting, they anticipate what is going to happen. They can spot an inattentive student a mile off. They can detect signs of incipient difficulty. Their senses are fully tuned to what is going on around them. They are not easily rattled. As younger students sometimes swear is true, they behave as though they had eyes in the back of their heads.

Is this image of expert teaching accurate? Are all seasoned teachers really like that? Are any of them? In short, are we talking about what is or what ought to be?

The quick sketch given here admittedly comes closer to the "ought" than the "is" of teachers and teaching. At the same time, it is not entirely a fiction.

It reminds me sufficiently of teachers I have known that I will defend it as a model realizable in the here and now.

But even more important than whether many or most teachers come to resemble our hypothetical expert, how does such a perspective on teaching address the array of questions treated in this chapter? Of special interest is what it seems to say about the relationship between what a teacher *does* and what he or she *thinks*.

I now return for a final time to the rather light-hearted discussions that took place in the nursery school, and readily admit, though it should be abundantly obvious, that I knew all along a person could not become a nursery school teacher simply by learning how to hold a book while reading a story to children or by bending this way or that while talking or listening to a small child. The teachers knew that as well, of course, which explains their willingness to go along with the fun. They knew, and I knew, that to be a real nursery school teacher one had to see and to react in a certain spirit or manner to a special portion of the world — rooms full of three- and four-year-olds. Specific skills, such as knowing how to make playdough or how to bandage a cut knee, had an important place in that world, as we might expect them to, but to mistake such skills for the heart of the matter, as my lunchtime boast seemed to do, was — well, just laughable, that's all.

Is the situation drastically different with other types of teaching? My own experience in colleges and universities leads me to say no. There too the difference between the novice (who for rhetorical purposes has been likened to an imposter) and his or her more experienced colleagues turns out to be less a matter of skill than one of feeling and acting at home within a particular instructional milieu.

This sense of "being at home" in the classroom is hard to specify, I admit, but as a psychological state it is quite genuine all the same. One of the nursery school teachers nearly referred to it directly when she said, "Well, even if the imposter never gives himself away, *he* knows he doesn't belong there."

some ultimate, non-modifiable definition of teaching (*true* teaching, let's call it) that we can discover through empirical and/or logical maneuvering?

We need first to acknowledge that the question is academic, in the sense that teachers themselves seem not to worry about it very much. Except when prodded by one of their instructors while in training or by a school administrator with nothing better to do, most teachers I have known seldom wonder aloud about the *true* meaning of teaching. Like other kinds of practitioners the world over, they usually are too busy doing what they have to do to worry about formal definitions of their practice.

Yet here are groups of people — educational philosophers among them — who do have time for such matters and who look upon it as part of their professional responsibility to answer the definitional question, whether practicing teachers are interested or not. Moreover, the answers they offer are more than academic exercises. These answers appear in textbooks and other "official" documents where they may potentially influence how teachers and others think about teaching.

This is hardly the place to examine all such efforts in detail. However, I would like to touch upon three different approaches to the task of determining once and for all what teaching is or should be. In my judgment, each of the three is seriously flawed, yet each builds from a foundational premise that in certain respects is quite appealing. Each strikes me as contributing to an understanding of why the search for a final, logically airtight definition of teaching is not only a futile undertaking but may even be harmful if allowed to legislate what teachers themselves must believe about their work.

I will call these three approaches to the definition of teaching the, *generic*, the *epistemic*, and the *consensual*. The meaning of those terms will become clear in the exposition to follow.

What I call a *generic* approach to the definition of teaching works like this: It begins by insisting that there be an important difference between a definition of teaching, on the one hand, and the performance of teaching on the other. This distinction is important, for it divides the labor of speaking authoritatively about teaching between two groups of professionals — educational philosophers and educational researchers. From this point of view it is the job of the philosophers to propose a definition of teaching that is sufficiently general to cover whatever future research might discover about the right *way* to teach. The job of researchers, in turn,

Teaching and Learning

is to discover answers to questions about how teaching should proceed. The result of the former effort will be singular and universal; that of the latter, plural and particular. Here is the way one well-known educational philosopher, B. O. Smith, poses the problem and then goes on to solve it.

"The way in which teaching is or can be performed," Smith tells us, is mistaken for teaching itself. In its generic sense, teaching is a system of actions intended to induce learning. So defined, teaching is everywhere the same, irrespective of the cultural context in which it occurs. But these actions may be performed differently from culture to culture or from one individual to another within the same culture, depending on the state of knowledge about teaching and the teacher's pedagogical knowledge and skill. Didactics, or the science and art of teaching, are not the same as the actions which they treat. A definition of teaching as such, which packs a set of biases about how these actions are to be conducted, confuses teaching with its science and its art."⁵

This approach has a degree of common sense about it that must be acknowledged at the start. Teaching may be variably performed, that much is certainly true. Thus it makes good sense to seek a definition of teaching that is flexible but not so broad that it embraces everything under the rubric of "teaching." The question is whether Smith's definition of teaching as a system of actions intended to induce learning fits the bill. I fear it does not.

Consider, for instance, the giving of medicine to a hyperactive child in order to calm him or her down so that she or he might benefit from instruction. This certainly must be acknowledged as a system of actions intended to induce learning, must it not? But is it an instance of teaching? I suspect few would be willing to consider it so.

And what of the work of school administrators? Much of what they do would certainly conform to Smith's generic definition of teaching. But, again, who would want to call most principals or superintendents teachers? I for one would not, and once again, I suspect most people would agree.

So Smith's generic definition of teaching, if I understand it correctly, is far too broad to be of much use. All of teaching fits within it, sure enough, but so do many other activities that we do not want to confuse with teaching.

And even if the definition could be tightened to exclude those activities we do not want,⁶ it is still hard to imagine that such a definition might be

useful in practice. Suppose we could define teaching generically — that is, say nothing about how teaching should be done but differentiate between teaching and all other activities. What would we do with such a definition once we had it? What questions of consequence would it help to answer? That I can think of none may reflect nothing more than my lack of imagination, but it is enough to leave me dubious about the promise of a *generic* approach to the definition of teaching.

An *epistemic*, as contrasted with a *generic*, definition of teaching links the activity to the concept of knowledge propounded by most modern epistemologists. In this view, knowledge is understood to be "evidentially supported belief." If we add to that understanding the corollary that teaching is primarily concerned with the transmission of such knowledge, we can begin to see that it *logically entails* certain kinds of actions and not others.

For example, it obliges teachers to provide grounds or reasons for the beliefs they seek to inculcate in their students. It requires them to be respectful of the truth and to be prepared at all times to reevaluate their own beliefs in the light of new evidence and in the face of fresh argument. It also demands that they seek to develop in each student his or her own capacity to test the worthiness of everything taught.

These obligations have nothing to do with personal choice or preference. Like a geometer's proof, they flow naturally from the starting premises of the argument, which say that teaching has to do with the spread of knowledge as contemporaneously defined and with the conditions conducive to that end.

From those same premises there follows a list of "don'ts" as well as "dos." Teachers committed to viewing knowledge as "evidentially supported belief" are also obliged not to intimidate, or threaten, or lie, or propagandize. They are sworn to avoid at all costs anything known to be inimical to the conduct of human inquiry and to the motivational spirit which animates it. Should they violate either set of these obligations, the positive or the negative, they step beyond the parameters of teaching as circumscribed by an epistemic definition.

This approach to a definition of teaching is attractive in several ways. To begin with, it is more philosophically sophisticated than is the generic approach. It does not so readily embrace features that teaching shares with many other activities. Instead, it tries to identify what is unique to teaching, what distinguishes it from all or almost all other

activities. Also, it speaks out on behalf of a conception of teaching that has many supporters, both within the profession and outside of it. The teacher as a purveyor of knowledge, in the sense explicated, is an ancient and honored image of what teachers and teaching are all about.

At the same time, the epistemic view is not without difficulties of its own. For one thing, it does not address educational goals that are only indirectly associated with the transmission of knowledge. It may well be that the development of attitudes, interests, values, and the like can be reduced to knowledge of one sort or another, but I doubt that many teachers regard those goals in that way.

Finally, the epistemic approach to a definition of teaching leaves us in an awkward position with respect to teachers, past and present, who did and do indeed indoctrinate, intimidate, propagandize, and goodness knows what else, thinking it quite proper to do so.⁷ What shall we say of them? Here is an answer given by Thomas Green, another educational philosopher, who is at the same time a strong advocate of an epistemic approach to the definition of teaching.

Lying, propagandizing, slander and threat of physical violence are not teaching activities, although they may be ways of influencing persons' beliefs or shaping their behavior. We know *in fact* that these activities are excluded from the concept of teaching with as much certainty as we know that training and instruction are included. [Emphasis added]⁸

It is a matter of no consequence that there have been societies which have extended the concept of teaching . . . [to include such practices] . . . That propaganda, lies, threats, and intimidation have been used as methods of education is not doubted. But the conclusion warranted by this fact is not that teaching includes such practices, but that education may. Propaganda, lies, threats are more or less effective means of influencing and shaping beliefs and patterns of behavior. It follows that teaching is not the only method of education. It does not follow that the use of propaganda, lies and threats are methods of teaching.⁹

We can treat undesirable actions on the part of teachers as instances of nonteaching, but one wonders what we gain by such a move. What it does, so far as I can tell, is sweep an interesting question under the rug, that question being: Why might teachers, past and present, have put such tactics to use in the first place? To imply that they did so out of ignorance, that they lacked knowledge of the true

meaning of teaching, seems a bit condescending, to say the least. It also begs the question of how or whether we can have a "true" definition of the term.

The third approach (I call it *consensual*) to the question of how to define teaching is close in spirit to the second, but more accommodating in tone and less rigidly tied to epistemological claims. It allows for many ways of teaching, but it seeks to distinguish between those that are *standard* and those that are *nonstandard*. Israel Scheffler, yet another educational philosopher, is an articulate spokesman for this point of view. "Teaching may, to be sure, proceed by various methods," Scheffler begins,

but some ways of getting people to do things are excluded from the *standard range* of the term 'teaching.' To teach, *in the standard sense*, is at some points at least to subject oneself to the understanding and independent judgment of the pupil, to his demand for reasons, to his sense of what constitutes an adequate explanation. To teach someone that such and such is the case is not merely to try to get him to believe it: deception for example, is not a method or mode of teaching . . . To teach is thus, *in the standard use of the term*, to acknowledge the 'reason' of the pupil, i.e. his demand for and judgment of reasons, even though such demands are not uniformly appropriate at every phase of the teaching interval. [Emphasis added]¹⁰

In what kind of society would Scheffler's version of teaching flourish? "It would be a place," he tells us,

where the culture itself institutionalizes reasoned procedures in its basic spheres, where it welcomes the exercise of criticism and judgment, where, that is to say, it is a democratic culture in the strongest sense. To support the widest diffusion of teaching as a model of cultural renewal is, in effect, to support something peculiarly consonant with the democratization of culture and something that poses a threat to cultures whose basic social norms are institutionally protected from criticism.¹¹

So in the final analysis it is only in a democratic society, or one in the process of becoming so, that teaching in Scheffler's sense of the term can be carried on. His standard use of the term is consensual in the dictionary sense of "existing or made by mutual consent without the intervention of any act of writing." But the consenting parties, in Scheffler's view, must be like-minded in broad political terms.

The notion that teaching in its "truest" sense can be carried on only in a democratic society may be

comforting to those of us who believe we live in such a society. But how fair is it to restrict by definition the idea of teaching to a particular political context? Is there not something a trifle chauvinistic about such a move?

Of course we should feel free to criticize the way teaching is carried out in societies other than our own, just as we should here at home. But I fail to see how it helps to approach this job of criticism armed with a definition that to start with rules out the possibility of our calling what goes on in non-democratic countries "teaching." Scheffler dodges this question, at least in part, by his willingness to speak of *non-standard* teaching. Yet, reading his words carefully, I must conclude that what he means by the *non-standard* form of the activity is almost not teaching at all.¹²

There is much to be said for both the epistemic and the consensual approaches to the definition of teaching, as this brief exposition sought to make clear. Each rests on a premise that many of today's teachers are almost certain to find attractive. It makes good sense to think that teaching is centrally concerned with the transmission of knowledge, as the epistemic approach insists we do. It is also appealing to think that teaching is a kind of emancipatory activity, either sustaining a democratic society or paving the way for its emergence, as the consensual approach requires.

But in the final analysis both views turn out to be more limiting than edifying. We must ask, why should teaching be perceived solely in terms of its contribution to the transmission of knowledge? And why must it be confined to the kind of teaching that typifies democratic societies (if any kind actually does)? But if we reject such limitations are we not forced back to a generic definition of the kind Smith proposed, one so general as to be useless? Not necessarily.

There is, I would suggest, a fourth approach to the question of how teaching is defined, an approach that I call *evolutionary*. The term comes from Stephen Toulmin, who describe such a view in the following way.

A properly evolutionary way of dealing with experience obliges us to recognize that no event or process has any single unambiguous description: we describe any event in different terms, and view it as an element in a different network of relations, depending on the standpoint from which — and the purposes for which — we are considering it.¹³

What would be the consequences of looking upon teaching in this way? We begin by conceding that there is no unequivocal definition of teaching that holds for all time and all places. What we accept as a satisfactory view of the process today within our society may not be the definition agreed upon in another time or another culture. But that does not mean that everyone holding different views, whether in the past or the present, can now be called wrong. What such an evolutionary view commits us to is neither the truth nor the falsity of any single definition; rather, it is an attempt to locate teaching within what Toulmin calls "a network of relations." Its place within that network is its ultimate source of meaning and significance.

Lest this sound far too abstract to be of practical help, let us move closer to the everyday world of teaching to see what the possible consequences of such a view might be. First of all, it would put to rest all ontological questions of the kind I discussed with teachers during my early days as a nursery school principal — questions of who is real and who is fake, whether one is really teaching as opposed to doing something else that might resemble teaching but is not the genuine article, and so forth.

This does not mean that people could no longer lie about their teaching abilities or falsify their credentials to make people believe they have had training when they have not. In short, it does not eliminate the possibility of frauds and fakes within the ranks of teachers. It does help us see that what is fraudulent in such situations is not teaching *per se* but the claim to competence.

To put the argument in a nutshell, there is no such thing as "genuine" teaching. There is only an activity that people call teaching, which can be viewed from a variety of critical perspectives. Sometimes the criticism that teaching can undergo leads us to conclude that the person performing the activity, or claiming to be able to perform it, has deceived us in some way. Such deceptions are rare, we would hope, but they have been known to happen.

Of far more practical importance than anything involving "genuine" teaching are questions of "good" and "poor" teaching. What does an "evolutionary" view of the process enable us to say about that? It leads to the understanding that we can make few if any judgments about the quality of teaching without reference to the context in which the action takes place; "context" is understood to cover far

more than the physical setting of the action. The phrase "cultural context" comes closer to the meaning being sought here. It includes the awarenesses, presuppositions, expectations, and everything else that impinges upon the action or that contributes to its interpretation by the actors themselves and by outsiders as well.

Consider this example. Teachers of approximately a hundred years ago routinely applied hickory sticks to the backsides of recalcitrant or misbehaving students, or so we are told. What shall we, today, make of that fact? Shall we think of our colleagues of years ago as having been poor teachers for behaving as they did?

I find that too hasty and harsh a judgment. Moreover, I see nothing to be gained by it. To learn something from the past it seems to me far more fruitful to ask why that particular practice (and others like it) have gradually died out. Such a question is also much more in keeping with what I am calling an "evolutionary" point of view. An understanding of the demise of the hickory stick yields a correlative understanding of why many related practices have disappeared as well.

But what about contemporary practice? Does an evolutionary and contextual outlook leave us powerless to criticize what goes on today? Does it get stalled at the level of "mere understanding," leaving the tough job of being critical and of taking a stand on issues to someone else?

Not at all. There is no incompatibility between understanding an activity and either approving or disapproving it. Here an example might help. Suppose we learn of a teacher who seeks to win a student over to his or her own point of view through deception of one kind or another. Does not such a practice surpass understanding and call for

immediate censure? Scheffler, for one, would say so, for he explicitly tells us that "deception . . . is not a method or mode of teaching." But what if we learn that the teacher in question is none other than Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the student his famous fictional creation, Emile?¹⁴

In such an instance would we not be better advised to try to understand what Rousseau was up to and why he did what he did *before* we conclude that censure is in order? What applies to fiction holds in real life as well. Confronted with any instance of teaching we might either praise or blame, we must always ask: What are the circumstances of the case? Why were these actions undertaken?¹⁵

Our answers to such questions no more prevent us from censuring any particular teacher (or a whole nation full of them, if need be) than does an investigation of an alleged crime prevent us from punishing the criminal. Indeed, the process of deliberating on such matters resembles that of case law more closely than it does that of establishing the proof of a theorem in geometry or mathematics. [. . .]

Who are real teachers and what is real teaching? There are no such things, says the person who has adopted an evolutionary point of view. There are interpretations of events, including those in which teachers are the central actors. There are arguments that can be made on behalf of this or that teaching practice. Some arguments are better than others. Doubtless there are some practices that most of us teaching today would defend. Part of our professional responsibility is to get on with that defense. If we are lucky, as I was during my fledgling days as a nursery school principal, the task of deciding who is and who is not a teacher, though serious enough in the long run will have its lighter moments as well.

Notes

1. The distinction between words that describe our trying to do something and words covering our success in having done it was brought to the fore within philosophical circles by Gilbert Ryle in his influential book *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949). In that work Ryle distinguished between what he called "task verbs" and "achievement verbs." The former refer to things one is trying to do, the latter to things one has done. For example, "kicking" is a task verb, "scoring" an achievement verb. A similar distinction holds between treating and healing, hunting and finding, listening and hearing,

and so forth. Teaching, as luck would have it, has come to be used in both senses, as something tried and as something accomplished, hence the confusion that plagues our understanding when it is not clear which of these senses applies.

2. John Dewey, *How We Think* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1933), pp. 34–5.
3. A process similar to the one described here is treated in some detail by Michael Polanyi in his book *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Polanyi referred to these unarticulated forms of knowing as "tacit knowledge."

Teaching and Learning

4. This question is treated in an intriguing manner in J. M. Stephens, *The Process of Schooling: A Psychological Examination* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967). Stephens hypothesizes that people with certain proclivities and impulses, such as the proclivity to detect errors and the impulse to correct them, are naturally drawn to teaching.
5. B. Othanel Smith, "A concept of teaching," in B. Othanel Smith and Robert H. Ennis (eds.), *Language and Concepts in Education* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1961), pp. 87-8.
6. One way to do so would be to restrict the meaning of the verb "induce" to that of "moving by persuasion or influence." But even this narrowing of normal usage seems to leave the definitional door too far ajar.
7. For a powerful statement on behalf of teachers as indoctrinators and propagandizers, see George C. Counts, *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?* (New York: John Day, 1932).
8. Thomas F. Green, "A typology of the teaching concept," in C. J. B. Macmillan and T. W. Nelson (eds.), *Concepts of Teaching: Philosophical Essays* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1968), pp. 36-7 (*italics added*).
9. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
10. Israel Scheffler, *The Language of Teaching* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1960), pp. 57-8 (*italics added*).
11. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
12. There is a real question whether it is possible to define teaching ontologically – in a way that speaks of its true meaning or essence – without also getting entangled with a definition that is axiological – one that involves the meaning of "good" teaching. For a discussion of this issue see W. A. Hart, "Is teaching what the philosophers understand by it?" *British Journal of Educational Studies* 24: 2 (June 1976) pp. 155-70.
13. Stephen Toulmin, "The charm of the scout," *New York Review of Books*, April 3, 1980, p. 38.
14. *Emile* is full of instances in which the teacher seeks to deceive his pupil in some way, to achieve what he alleges to be a pedagogical end.
15. For an interesting discussion of how the case study point of view has moved from medicine to ethical theory and has rejuvenated the latter, see Stephen Toulmin, "How medicine saved the life of ethics," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 25: 4 (Summer 1982), pp. 736-50.