

ON THE NATURE OF TEACHING AND TEACHER EDUCATION

DIFFICULT PRACTICES THAT LOOK EASY

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The effort over the past 150 years to create an effective and respected system for preparing teachers in the United States has not been easy. A large body of research on the history of teacher-education reform is a tale of persistent mediocrity and resistance to change. The author's aim in this article is not to revisit this sad story, but to examine an old and enduring problem that has long blocked the path to a truly professional education for teachers, that teaching is an enormously difficult job that looks easy. The author explores the roots of the gap between the reality and the perception of learning to teach by first spelling out some of the characteristics of teaching that make it such a difficult form of professional practice. He then examines key elements in the nature of teaching that make the process of becoming a teacher seem so uncomplicated.

Consider some of the major factors that make teaching and teacher education such difficult practices.

The Problem of Client Cooperation

At the core of the difficulties facing teachers, as David Cohen has put it, is that "teaching is a practice of human improvement" (Cohen, 1988, p. 55). One problem that arises from being in such a practice is that these "practitioners depend on their clients to achieve any results" (p. 57). A surgeon can fix the ailment of a patient who sleeps through the operation, and a lawyer

can successfully defend a client who remains mute during the trial, but success for a teacher depends heavily on the active cooperation of the student (Fenstermacher, 1990). The student must be willing to learn what the teacher is teaching. Unless this intended learning takes place, the teacher is understood as having failed. It was this reciprocal notion of the teacher-student relationship that Dewey (1933) had in mind when he said, "There is the same exact equation between teaching and learning that there is between selling and buying" (as quoted in Jackson, 1986, p. 81). That is, you can't be a good salesperson unless someone is buying, and you can't be a good teacher unless someone is learning.

Consider how terribly difficult this makes things for teachers and others trying to work as practitioners of human improvement. They must devote enormous amounts of skill and effort to the task of motivating the client to cooperate, and still the outcome is far from certain. The client may choose to spurn the practitioner's offer of improvement out of apathy, habit,

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principle, spite, inattention, or whim. In such a field, success rates are likely to be low, and the connection between a practitioner's action and a client's outcome is likely to be, at best, indirect. Therefore, the effectiveness of the practitioner becomes difficult to establish.

The Problem of a Compulsory Clientele

The difficulty of gaining the compliance of the student is made even worse for the teacher because the student is only present in the classroom under duress. A central fact of school life is that, given the choice, students would be doing something other than studying algebra or geography or literature or biology. Part of the compulsion is legal. But students are likely to feel the pressure for attendance more directly from their parents (who want school to take care of children during the day, to help them get ahead, and even to educate them), from the market (which makes school credentials mandatory for access to a good job), and from their own social desires (school is where their friends are).

No one has written about the consequences of involuntary learning on both teacher and student in more depth or with greater bile than Waller (1932/1965) did in his classic book, *The Sociology of Teaching*:

The teacher-pupil relationship is a form of institutionalized domination and subordination. . . . The teacher represents the formal curriculum, and his interest is in imposing that curriculum upon the children in the form of tasks; pupils are much more interested in life in their own world than in the desiccated bits of adult life which teachers have to offer. (pp. 195-196)

According to Waller (1932/1965), control is the central problem facing the teacher, and every novice approaching the classroom for the first time would certainly agree with him.

The Problem of Emotion Management

Another characteristic of teaching that makes it difficult is the way it requires teachers to establish and actively manage an emotional relationship with students. This is in striking contrast to the norms that govern most profes-

sions, including those that focus on human improvement. Consider the characteristics of the prototypical professional relationship, and then consider the implications for teaching that arise from the sharp differences between this and the teacher-student relationship. Professional practitioners in general are expected to maintain a distinct emotional distance between themselves and the client. They focus on the particular problem for which the client is seeking professional help, they are judged on their performance in resolving this problem, they and the client are seen as independent agents pursuing their own ends through the relationship, and this relationship is governed by universalistic rules of procedure.

These five characteristics of professional-client relationships are drawn from the "pattern variables" developed by Parsons (1951), which are five pairs of alternative orientations that can be used to define distinctive types of role relationships: (a) affective neutrality versus affectivity, (b) specificity versus diffuseness, (c) achievement versus ascription, (d) self versus collective orientation, and (e) universalism versus particularism. As the theory goes, professionals in their interaction with clients are governed by the first orientation in each of these pairs. In this regard, they fit in a large category of limited and utilitarian role relationships that sociologists term *secondary*, in contrast to primary relationships, which are broad and emotionally involving.

In comparison to the relative clarity of the role defined for the typical professional, teachers find themselves in a much more complicated role environment. Teachers need to develop a broad relationship with students for the purpose of understanding their learning problems (Fenstermacher, 1990). They also need to establish an emotional link to motivate the student to participate actively in the learning process.

There are several characteristics of this need to establish an affectionate relationship with students that add profoundly to the difficulty involved in being a good teacher. First, there is no guidebook for how to accomplish this for any particular teacher in a particular classroom. Like other practitioners in the professions of

human improvement, teachers have to work things out on their own, without being able to fall back on standards of acceptable professional practice such as those that guide lawyers, doctors, and accountants. At the start of their careers, teachers fumble around for a way to establish an emotional link with students that is effective and sustainable, for the teaching persona that works best for them. This persona is both natural, in that it draws on characteristics and strengths of the teacher as a person, and constructed, in that it is put together to serve the ends of promoting learning in the classroom.

Second, the practice of teaching throws the teacher into an extraordinarily complex role that in awkward fashion combines characteristics of both primary and secondary relationships. In Parsons's (1951) terms, the teacher role combines a mandate for emotional closeness and diffuse interaction, both characteristic of primary roles, with mandates for achievement (giving students rewards based on performance, not ascribed traits), independence (encouraging students to develop and rely on their own skills and knowledge), and universalistic application of rules (treating all students the same), all of which are characteristic of secondary roles. Teachers are asked to use the leverage obtained from their primary relations with students to support the teaching of a curriculum that is external to these primary ties. To be really good at teaching requires a remarkable capacity for preserving a creative tension between these opposites, never losing sight of either teaching's relational means or its curricular goal.

Third, teachers face the strain of trying to manage the emotional relationship with students by maintaining the teaching persona that makes this relationship work. Maintaining the teaching persona is a case of what Hochschild (1983) refers to as "emotion management." In her book, *The Managed Heart*, she explores a variety of "jobs that call for emotional labor" by requiring "the worker to produce an emotional state in another" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 147). She never refers directly to teachers in this study, but

her analysis fits teachers all too well. These types of jobs, she argues, are particularly difficult and stressful because the only way one can produce the desired emotional state in another person is by effectively managing one's own emotions. The role of the teacher, like the role of other emotion workers, cannot be taken on superficially if one is going to be effective in this role. The aim is to have an impact on the emotions of the student, and in emotional matters, students have sensitive antennae for detecting a fake.

The Problem of Structural Isolation

Exacerbating the teacher's problem in trying to motivate the captive learner is the condition of structural isolation within which the teacher has to operate. Ever since the invention of age-graded education early in the 19th century, teachers have found themselves plying their trade within the four walls of the self-contained classroom. They normally teach under conditions where they are the only professional in the room, left to their own devices to figure out a way to manage a group of 30 students and move them through the required curriculum.

One consequence of this is to reinforce the teacher's focus on control issues. Vastly outnumbered by students and cut off from professional support, teachers are left to confront the "two rules governing the hidden tension of classroom life: unless the teacher establishes control there will be no learning, and, if the teacher does not control the students, the students will control the teacher" (Britzman, 1986, p. 449). To rise to this challenge, the teacher must turn the classroom into a personal fiefdom, a little duchy complete with its own set of rules and its own local customs. A related consequence of isolation is to create a vision of learning to teach as a private ordeal (Lortie, 1975) and a vision of the emergent teacher as self-made (Britzman, 1986). This leaves little room for the construction of a shared professional culture for teachers across classroom domains, and it also sharply

undercuts the perceived value of teacher preparation programs.

The Problem of Chronic Uncertainty About the Effectiveness of Teaching

The technology of teaching is anything but certain, and teachers must learn to live with chronic uncertainty as an essential component of their professional practice (Cohen, 1988; Floden & Clark, 1988; Jackson, 1986; Lortie, 1975). One reason for this is that teachers have to operate under the kinds of daunting conditions I have been outlining in this article, conditions that introduce unpredictable elements of will and emotion into the heart of the teaching and learning processes.

However, even if we focus on the more predictable factors shaping teaching and learning, teaching remains an uncertain enterprise for another reason: its irreducible complexity. What we know about teaching is always contingent on a vast array of intervening variables that mediate between a teacher's action and a student's response. As a result, there is always a *ceteris paribus* clause hovering over any instructional prescription: this works better than that, if everything else is equal.

A third source of uncertainty in the work of teaching is that we are unable to measure adequately the effects that teachers have on students. A teacher can measure how many of the spelling words introduced this week a child can spell on Friday or how well a student can solve word problems of the type just covered in class. But what does this show about the larger and more meaningful aims the teacher had in mind when teaching these subjects? The most important outcomes that we want education to make possible, the preparation of competent, productive, and socially responsible adults, are removed from any particular classroom interaction between teacher and student by many years and many other intervening factors.

A fourth source of uncertainty in teaching is the complex and often contradictory purposes that societies impose on the whole educational

enterprise. In some ways, we want education to promote democratic equality (preparing competent citizens); we also want education to promote social efficiency (preparing productive workers); in addition, we want education to promote social mobility (preparing individuals who can compete successfully for social goods). Yet, the kind of teaching and learning that will be effective varies radically depending on whether the primary aim is to prepare citizens or workers or social climbers (Labaree, 1997).

A fifth source of uncertainty is that teachers are not even in a position to establish clearly the identity of their client. At one level, the client is the student. At another level, the clients are the parents of the student. At a third level, the teacher's client is the community at large, which not only pays for public education but also feels the effects of the teacher's ability to produce competent citizens and productive workers. Keeping all these clients happy is not an easy matter.

A JOB THAT SEEMS EASY

If teaching is indeed a practice as difficult as I have portrayed here, then there is no form of professional practice that is more demanding, except, perhaps, teacher education. We ask teacher education programs to provide ordinary college students with the imponderable so that they can teach the irrepressible in a manner that pleases the irreconcilable, and all without knowing clearly either the purposes or the consequences of their actions. Is it any wonder that these programs are not seen as smashing successes? But that is not the end of the problem confronting teacher educators. In addition, they face a situation in which the profession of teaching is generally seen to be relatively easy. And this perception is not simply characteristic of the untutored public; it is also endemic among teacher candidates.

Apprenticeship of Observation

Lortie (1975) makes a convincing case that prospective teachers spend a long time as stu-

dents observing the way teachers ply their trade, and as a result they feel they know how to teach in some depth before they take their first course in a college of education. "It may be that the widespread idea that 'anyone can teach' . . . originates from this; what child cannot, after all, do a reasonably accurate portrayal of a classroom teacher's actions?" (Lortie, 1975, p. 62). In comparison with teaching, other occupations, particularly other professions, remain largely a mystery.

However, the mistake in this reasoning by prospective teachers is clear: Their apprenticeship of observation shows them a lot about what teachers do but almost nothing about why they do it. Teaching from this observational and nonanalytical perspective appears to be simple action, guided either by custom (this is the way teaching is done) or by nature (this is the kind of person I am). In neither case would teacher preparation be necessary or even useful. What students don't see is the thinking that preceded the teacher's action, the alternatives she considered, the strategic plan within which she located the action, or the aims she sought to accomplish by means of that action. These are the things that teacher preparation programs seek to teach, and legitimately so, but in so doing, they run into enormous resistance from teacher candidates who don't think they need this kind of professional education.

Ordinary Skills and Knowledge

Another impediment facing teacher education is the general perception that the substantive skills and knowledge that teachers possess are thoroughly ordinary. The root of this problem is that elementary and secondary education is imposed on the entire populace. It is not elite education; it is mass education. If it does its job well, the kinds of skills and knowledge that it transmits to students become generic in the population at large. Therefore, unlike college professors who are expected to be experts at a level well beyond the understanding of ordinary citizens, schoolteachers are seen as masters of what most adults already know. What they teach isn't rocket science; it's common knowledge. By extension, teacher educators, although

technically college professors, are not involved in an enterprise that is seen as either awe-inspiring or even particularly necessary.

Subject Matter Expertise That Belongs to Others

Worse yet, teacher educators have no legitimate claim to special expertise even in the substantive fields where they ply their trade. They may be specialists in mathematics education, literacy or English education, social studies or history education, or science education, but they do not have academic credibility as mathematicians, linguists, literature specialists, historians, or scientists. Substantive expertise does not reside within the education school that prepares teachers, but in the disciplinary departments across campus where professors carry out specialized research and run advanced graduate programs that explore the more esoteric realms of these disciplines, far beyond the reach of ordinary adults and far beyond the mandate or expertise of K-12 teachers. This situation puts teacher educators not only at a status disadvantage within the academic hierarchy, it also puts them in an untenable position in relation to the production of teachers. Teacher education does not have control over providing teachers with the substantive knowledge they will need to teach, but it takes full blame for any deficiencies in knowledge that these teachers may demonstrate in the classroom.

Pedagogical Skill That Is Unobscure and Freely Given Away

Like doctors, lawyers, accountants, and architects, teachers have to master their disciplines to be effective in their professions, but knowing their subject matter is not sufficient. Professionals are not simply holders of knowledge; they are people who act on this knowledge for the benefit of clients. The difference between teachers and other professionals in this regard, however, is striking. As Fenstermacher (1990) points out, most professionals use their knowledge to help the client with a problem, but they don't provide the client with the capacity to figure it out for himself or herself the next

time around. "One of the ways that physicians have succeeded in garnering the status and income they presently enjoy is to 'lock up' or mystify their knowledge" (Fenstermacher, 1990, p. 136).

Most professionals rent their expertise without disclosing its mysteries, so they can reserve its power to themselves. The next time that clients need help with a medical, legal, or accounting problem, they have no choice but to return to the professional for another fix, another intervention, another rental of expertise. Teachers are different.

They don't rent their expertise, they give it away. A good teacher is in the business of making himself or herself unnecessary, of empowering learners to learn without the teacher's help. By doing things this way, teachers demystify their own expertise and thus willingly abandon the source of power over the client that other professions guard so jealously.

In the same manner, teacher educators are in the business of demystifying teaching, giving away their own expertise to empower the prospective teacher to carry on the practice of teaching without need for continuous consultation and chronic dependency. In both cases, teacher and teacher educator put themselves in positions that diminish their own status and power in order to enhance the capacity and independence of their students. This distinctive mode of professional practice helps explain much of the disdain that both professions must endure, but at the same time this quixotic selflessness also endows teachers and teacher educators with just a hint of frayed nobility.

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