

Is Teaching a Practice?

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I argue here that Alasdair MacIntyre is mistaken when he claims that teaching is not a practice. In particular, I try to throw some doubt on his claim that 'teaching is never more than a means' and to challenge his list of things that all students should learn. In the second section, I show how analyses of professionalism endorse MacIntyre's emphasis on complexity and internal criteria for practices. Finally, building on the doubts observed in the first section and the criteria identified in the second, I describe teaching as a relational practice.

In a dialogue with Joseph Dunne, Alasdair MacIntyre (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002) suggests that teaching is not itself a 'practice,' although it serves other practices. I think he is mistaken on this and mistaken by his own criteria as laid out in *After Virtue* (MacIntyre, 1981). Whether teaching is or is not a practice can be added to a set of questions of continuing interest to educational theorists: is teaching best described as a profession? Semi-profession? Vocation? Enterprise? Occupation? Calling?

When I started this paper, I did not think it mattered much what we might decide on any of these labels. Now I think it might matter a lot. I will argue here that it is more nearly right to describe teaching as a practice than as a profession, and there is more to be gained by doing so. In the first section of this paper, by revisiting earlier analyses, I hope to throw some doubt on MacIntyre's claim that 'teaching is never more than a means' and to challenge his list of things all students should learn. In the second section, I will show how analyses of professionalism endorse his emphasis on complexity and internal criteria for practices. Finally, building on the doubts identified in the first section and the criteria identified in the second, I will describe teaching as a relational practice.

DEFINING TEACHING

In the 1960s and early 1970s, analytic philosophers of education were engaged in trying to define teaching. Much of the debate centred on the

question of whether teaching implies learning. John Dewey had (inadvertently) set the stage by writing:

Teaching may be compared to selling commodities. No one can sell unless someone buys. We should ridicule a merchant who said that he had sold a great many 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 (1933, pp. 35–36).

Thirty years after Dewey made these comments, teachers and teaching came under attack in the USA when the Russians had launched Sputnik (1957), and the USA seemed to be falling behind in the space race. Schools and teachers were blamed for the apparent failure. Without repeating all the arguments that arose, I will try to summarise the conclusions and connect the earlier analyses to our current question whether teaching is or is not a practice.

First, there seems to be agreement that teaching is conceptually and practically dependent on learning. Aristotle pointed out that teaching is an activity that finds its results in the learner, not in the teacher. Were there no need for learning, there would be no need for teaching. This does not mean, however, that teaching must always produce learning (and Dewey did not say that every effort at teaching must do so), but it must be constructed around the perceived need for learning.

In the basic conceptual relationship, we see a connection to MacIntyre's claim that 'teaching is never more than a means' (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 9). Surely, it *is* a means, but it may be too strong to say that it is no more than that. In the last section of this paper, I will argue that, conceived as a relation, it is much more than that. We might also note that, if means-defined activities are not to be considered 'practices', it is hard to see why MacIntyre classifies medicine as a practice (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 194). Surely, medicine is a means of treating and curing illness and injury. It does not exist for itself. Furthermore, even portrait painting as described by MacIntyre is to some degree means-oriented. Surely portrait painters are dependent on clients, viewers of art and galleries or other places to exhibit. Should we say that portrait painting serves the practice of art appreciation? It seems ingenuous to claim that portrait painters would continue to paint if there were no possibility that anyone would look at their work. Still, the means-ends connections, I admit, are tighter in teaching and medicine than in portrait painting. When we look at the teaching-learning connection we have to agree that teaching is means-oriented. But, unlike medicine (which is also means-oriented), it often involves a relationship close to friendship and, in this aspect, it is not means-oriented. Moreover, learning is not the only end sought in teaching. At least, the learning of content specified in the school curriculum is not the sole end of teaching.

Second, it is generally agreed that the so-called ‘standard thesis’ of Israel Scheffler (1960, 1968) and B. O. Smith (1961) is right in denying that teaching must always produce learning. Surely, someone claiming to teach must produce learning in a satisfactory number of students (just as the salesperson must sell products to at least some customers), but we can hardly insist that every student must learn what the teacher ‘teaches’. Such insistence, captured by the current slogan ‘All students can learn’, prompts the question, what can all children learn? This is not a trivial question, and we should give it careful attention. Even if we were able to answer that question satisfactorily, we would still have to recognise that, beyond common basics (and we are not even sure what these are), every student needs a great deal more. But what is needed differs from student to student. A student planning a scientific career needs different preparation from one planning a career in art. This observation also prompts questions about MacIntyre’s recommendations for general education (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 14) to which I will return. For the moment, it is enough to note that teachers must consider all of these questions carefully. It is not their job simply to secure demonstrable learning on a pre-specified set of objectives.

It is fair to point out, however, that Dewey did not say that every bona fide teaching act has to produce learning in every student. The point of his selling-buying analogy is that teachers cannot go on claiming to teach if no one learns. Notice, too, that his analogy includes what might be called the ‘past tense’ argument. During the process, I might claim to be teaching *X* to *A*, even without evidence of learning, but I have a more difficult time making the claim that I *taught A*, if *A* did not learn *X* (Campbell, 1965). It seems clear that most of us today construe ‘teach’ as both a task word and an achievement word (Ryle, 1952). It points both to an attempt to get someone to learn and to success at that task. But notice that such an analysis ignores the question of what students should be asked to learn and why. It also ignores the question raised above whether the learning of specified content is the only end of teaching. Good teachers sometimes put aside subject matter learning entirely in the interests of helping students to understand issues more central to everyday life.

Third, despite the fact that the analytic fuss over the definition of teaching now seems a bit of sophisticated game-playing, there are elements of that analysis that remain problematic and are related to the present inquiry. Scheffler (1960, 1968) offered three criteria for teaching: intention, reasonableness and manner. To be credited with teaching, a person must intend to get someone to learn something, say, *X*; she must choose a method that is ‘not unreasonably’ thought likely to produce the intended learning; and she must conduct herself in a manner by which the student is not ‘systematically precluded from asking “How?” “Why?” or “On what grounds?”’ (Scheffler, 1968, p. 27). In discussing these criteria, Scheffler does not mean to say that every teaching act is so characterised but, rather, that the criteria apply to the set of teaching activities taken as a whole—as an enterprise. If we look at intention, for example, we see that many of a teacher’s acts do not have learning as the intention (Komisar,

1968), but a person would not be engaged as a ‘teacher’ if her basic intention were not to produce some form of learning.

More important, however, is what we mean by learning. Discussion of the meanings and types of learning would take us too far afield, but we should note that theoreticians spend perhaps too much time defending one form of learning (e.g., constructivist learning) over all others. A potentially more fruitful approach would study what the best teachers do to answer the question: what form or level of learning is called for by *this* topic, for *this* student, in *this* situation? Furthermore, learning may occur without (or even contrary to) the teacher’s intention (Jackson, 1992), and this possibility suggests that teachers must be aware of and reflective about what they are conveying to students through their manner.

Scheffler’s criterion of manner has come to be known as the ‘rationality’ criterion. He wanted to preserve a significant place for human teachers in an electronic age, and he hoped also to exclude indoctrination and other scripted forms of producing learning from the category of ‘teaching.’ Teaching, for Scheffler, must display respect for the student’s rationality. This take on teaching seems to capture teaching at its deepest and best. The rationality criterion should be met when we look at a teacher’s overall performance. But surely, even teachers who are dedicated to ‘rationality’ in Scheffler’s sense sometimes use methods that are not clearly marked by the criterion. Should we say that, at these times, they are not teaching? And suppose that a given teacher rarely meets the rationality criterion but, through methods such as direct instruction (telling), conditioning or even indoctrination, secures a considerable amount of learning. Is she not teaching? It might be better to include all of these activities on a ‘teaching continuum’ (Green, 1968) and give our attention, as suggested above, to matching each to appropriate learning goals.

But we need to say much more about ‘manner’. It is not only students’ rationality that must be respected; students need and want teachers to care for them as persons and to convey this care through listening and responding to their expressions of concern (Noddings, 1992a, 1999). It matters to students whether or not they like and are liked by their teachers. The teacher as person is centrally important in teaching. A physician can concentrate entirely on *treating* her patients; so long as she exercises the virtues that reflect her expertise, her personal character and personality matter very little. But the teacher sets an example with her whole self—her intellect, her responsiveness, her humour, her curiosity . . . her care. As Martin Buber said, students learn from teachers with whom they work closely something about ‘the mystery of personal life’ (1965, p. 90). This sort of learning is not usually recognised as the learning for which formal schooling was established. Yet it has always been involved in teaching—both formal and informal, and it may be inherent in the teacher–learner relation. It does not have to be intended. This again casts doubt on the contention that teaching is never more than a means. Indeed, in reading much of MacIntyre’s work (and appreciating it), I cannot believe he would disagree with this.

Next consider Scheffler's criterion of reasonableness. Teachers cannot guarantee that their teaching will produce learning, he said. But the methods they choose must not be 'unreasonably thought to be likely to achieve the learning aimed at' (1968, p. 27). Again, Scheffler seems to have captured how lessons are really conducted by teachers. If a teacher intends to get students to solve quadratic equations, she or he must choose methods designed to achieve this aim.

Some years ago, I argued that if the criterion of reasonableness were continuously applied, the outcome would necessarily be learning (Noddings, 1976), and thus the 'teaching implies learning' thesis would be upheld even at the level of individual teaching episodes. If a teacher chooses a method that is reasonable at the outset and if that choice remains reasonable at every stage of the activity, learning must result. However, continuous evaluation is almost impossible, and even when a teacher works with only one student, the situation is complex. If at any point, the initially chosen method no longer seems likely to produce the intended learning, what should the teacher do? She might retain the objective and seek another method of instruction, revise the objective slightly by removing unnecessary factors that enrich but complicate the topic, drop the original objective and substitute another, or take time out to discuss matters (other than learning) of concern to the student. Which should she do and why? In this common classroom experience, we see that a teacher's job extends well beyond introducing students to a particular subject.

When teachers work with twenty-five or more students, the situation becomes even more complex. If most students are 'getting it', should she simply continue and hope that the few who are not getting it will do better on the next objective? (I often did this in my early days as a mathematics teacher.) Should she break the class into groups and establish different objectives for each group? (This is what I frequently did as a more mature maths teacher.) Should she ask the students who have mastered the objective to work with those who have not? (I did this, too, but it is not trouble-free.) What might the advanced students learn in these sessions? How much time should be given to such activity and, if it is tried, will a change in objective still be required and, perhaps, happen informally, almost implicitly?

I am suggesting that 'reasonableness' applies not only to the original choice of method but also to choice of topics, objectives, activities aimed not at learning but at establishing and maintaining caring relations, and to the depth of understanding to be sought. But this is highly controversial. Some advocates of behavioural objectives (in the 1960s and 1970s) insisted that teachers should never abandon an objective but continue to devise methods by which it could be reached. Similarly, many educators today demand that all students meet pre-set standards in an expanding array of subjects. (Perversely, when all students do meet such standards, the standards are raised. 'They must be too easy', if too many students meet them.) Teachers are not allowed to vary topics, skills and standards to fit their students' needs.

Unfortunately, MacIntyre's suggestion that every child should be taught 'mathematics up to and including the differential calculus . . . at least one Icelandic saga, some Chaucer, and some Shakespeare . . .' (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 14) falls into this 'one size fits all' pattern. I realise that, in a short question and answer format, he did not have the space required to justify his responses as reasonable. My sense is, however, that no amount of space could make these recommendations reasonable. It just is not reasonable to expect all students to learn (in any meaningful sense of the word) mathematics through differential calculus. Even if they could, why should they? (See Noddings, 1994.) Are there no more important things to be learned? It seems likely that MacIntyre would argue on the basis of communicating an important tradition, and I have great sympathy for this view, but there are many sub-traditions in Western society that do not include differential calculus. I would advocate enough exposure (risk-free) to mathematics to ensure that students who want to participate in this tradition would be able to do so.

I agree wholeheartedly with MacIntyre, however, that it would be wonderful if 'fishing crews and farmers and auto mechanics and construction workers were able to think about their lives critically' (2002, p. 15). It would be equally wonderful if the same could be said of the graduates of our finest institutions of liberal education. But historical evidence does not support the contention that liberal studies, traditionally defined, produce this result. Some liberally educated people think deeply, critically, morally; many do not. And, with Dewey, I do not see why the practical topics of interest to fishing crews and farmers cannot be taught in a way that encourages critical thinking. It is not the subjects themselves that induce critical thinking, but the ways in which they are taught and learned. This is not to say that there are no topics richer in possibilities than others. There are. But teachers need to know which rich veins to tap with individual students and how best to mine those riches.

So far, using earlier analyses of teaching, I have identified some problems that are still with us, and I have cast some doubt on MacIntyre's contention that teaching is entirely means-oriented. I have also raised an objection to his recommendation that all students be subjected to a traditional liberal arts curriculum. However, when he discusses the complexity and internal standards of excellence characteristic of practices, I agree enthusiastically. We should encourage thorough discussion of the internal standards of teaching. One approach to the issue is found in explorations of teaching as a profession.

IS TEACHING A PROFESSION?

Is teaching a profession? What would make it so? In trying to answer these questions, it is useful to make a distinction between *professionalism* and *professionalisation*:

The former refers to a set of standards and practices approved by a profession; in a global sense, it refers to a highly skillful and ethically

admirable way of performing in an occupation. For example, we often say of a proficient mechanic or plumber, 'He is a real professional.' When we use *professionalism* in this way we refer to a person or group's adherence to a set of high standards internal to the practice under consideration (Noddings, 1992b, p. 197).

In contrast, *professionalisation* usually refers to the status characteristics of an occupation. It is defined by sociology, not by the internal standards of the occupation. When sociologists discuss professions, they mention the following features: control over selection and regulation of members, specialised knowledge and language, altruism or service, privilege and status hierarchies, collegiality and autonomy. Over the twentieth century, there was a marked shift of interest away from professionalism and toward professionalisation. The emphasis on professionalisation has led occupations such as teaching and nursing, struggling for full professional status, to focus, perhaps too narrowly, on the external features of professions instead of the complexity, uniqueness and integrity of their activities.

Notice that, in the paragraph quoted above, I used the word *practice*. Indeed, I cited MacIntyre (1981) and used his description of practices to define important features of professions. Under that description, it certainly seemed to me, as it does to Dunne (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 7), that teaching qualifies as a practice, if not a profession. If it fails to be a profession, it fails on the sociological criteria of control over selection and regulation, privilege and status hierarchies, autonomy and perhaps collegiality. It does not fail on the criteria of specialised knowledge and altruism. It does not help the status of teaching, however, when educators adopt and put into use a specialised language. Often such language is just jargon and elicits mockery, not respect. The reason for this may be that the contrived language is not necessary to teaching as a practice in the way that such a language is necessary to, say, chess. Indeed, the use of jargon obscures one of the internal excellences of teaching—the power to communicate in language that can be understood by one who is not proficient in the practice. Far from possessing a specialised language that marks its practitioners and can only be understood by them, teaching requires proficiency in a variety of languages from baby talk and street talk to the vocabulary of the disciplines—all of them moderated and gradually transformed into the primary standard forms of communication in a given society. This proficiency is rightly regarded as an internal excellence of teaching.

Among the features of professions identified by sociology, one might suppose that altruism or service should count as an internal excellence. I think it does, and it contributes to our description of teaching as a practice. Most young people who enter teaching do so because they want to make a difference in the lives of the students they will teach. In this sense, teaching is a 'calling' (Hansen, 1995). Similarly, when we take time out of a busy day to teach something to our own child or a friend, we do it with the other's good in mind. Concern for another is fundamental to teaching as a practice. Unfortunately, altruism or service is often

perceived as a sign of weakness with respect to professional status. Too often it is associated with women's work, and the caring professions—e.g., teaching, nursing and social work—are thus classified as 'semi-professions' (Etzioni, 1969).

Because it lacks the main external features of professions, it is hard to insist that teaching is a profession, but I believe we can show that it is a practice. In doing this, we can also show how teaching is harmed or diminished by the emphasis on professionalisation. We might note also that the premier professions—medicine and law—have fallen on bad days in the eyes of the public. It might be better for them, too, to exert more effort on the internal excellences than to spend time defending their status as professions.

TEACHING AS RELATIONAL PRACTICE

What sort of practice is teaching? Teaching is not, I will argue, merely a way of introducing students to other practices. It is a bad mistake, in fact, for a mathematics teacher to 'think of her or himself as a mathematician' (MacIntyre, 2002, p. 5). Mathematics teachers at Kindergarten and primary school level are *not* mathematicians. Certainly they do not qualify as mathematicians on the external criteria identified for professions, and they are not recognised by mathematicians as members of that profession. But they do not meet the internal criteria either. They do not produce new mathematics, nor do they spend large parts of their working day doing mathematics. Only a very few – even at the high school level – have sufficient knowledge to initiate some of their students into mathematics as a practice. And to do this, they need the special skills of a teacher in order to decide when and with whom to do this.

We have to be careful here not to slip from MacIntyre's definition of 'practice' to another, more common, meaning. I do not mean to suggest that because people can earn a living by doing X, that makes X a practice. Rather, I want the observation that mathematics teachers do not earn their living by doing mathematics to prompt the questions: What is it that mathematicians do? Why is mathematics a practice? If we examine these questions carefully, we will see that very few schoolteachers of mathematics are mathematicians. We must then ask: What is it that teachers do? Why is teaching a practice?

Let's start with mathematicians. We see that mathematicians do not agree on the essence of mathematics, and we cannot settle that issue here. Benjamin Peirce defined mathematics as 'the science which draws necessary conclusions' (C.S. Peirce, 1956, p. 1773). Others define it as the science of quantity. Some branches of mathematics do deal with counting and measurement, but Peirce's definition seems the more inclusive one. Mathematicians deal with abstractions, hypothetical premises from which conclusions can be drawn. Those who 'do' mathematics continually extend the body of what is known (that is, of what has already been concluded) by drawing new conclusions and by introducing new

hypotheses or changing old ones. They deal in postulate systems. Some mathematicians ('applied mathematicians') use the abstractions already developed to solve concrete problems. The internal criteria of excellence in mathematical practice include a capacity for reasoning with abstractions, a sense of economy and elegance in contriving proofs, a deep understanding of postulate systems, a facility with the construction and manipulation of mathematical symbols, thorough knowledge of some branch of mathematics and facility with the vocabulary of mathematics; then, all of these are manifested in doing, producing mathematics. One is tempted to add a list of capacities needed by mathematicians who would gain recognition in the field: knowledge of the open problems in one's field, a sense of what others are doing, understanding of how mathematical fields are related and which is most likely to provide a solution to any given problem. Strictly speaking, however, these features straddle the internal and external. One could be ignorant of the last three—as the great Indian mathematician Ramanujan was—and still practise mathematics.

Few schoolteachers meet these criteria. When they satisfy some of them, we might say that they are practising mathematics at a limited level. They might, theoretically, meet all of them and fail miserably as teachers. Teaching as a practice exhibits very different features, and it should not be a criticism of teachers that they do not meet the criteria required of practising mathematicians. Of course, one might—as many university professors do—engage in both the practice of mathematics and the practice of teaching. The best high school teachers of mathematics also meet some of the criteria of excellence in mathematics as they demonstrate how mathematics is done.

How might we describe the 'goods internal to that form of activity' called teaching (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 187)? First, schoolteachers accept some responsibility for the development of students as whole persons. The younger the student, the greater this responsibility. As the student grows older, the balance of responsibility shifts, but even the university teacher bears some of this responsibility. We affect the lives of students not just in what we teach them by way of subject matter but in how we relate to them as persons.

I still remember with great affection a university professor of mathematics who halted a lecture with a very stressed class to say, 'This isn't a matter of life and death, you know'. After a collective sigh of relief, we worked together to figure things out. We were encouraged to concentrate on learning and co-operation instead of competition and acing the test.

Working with young children, good teachers are keenly aware that they might have devastating effects or uplifting effects on their students. Some of these effects last, or at least are remembered, for a lifetime. This first great good of teaching—response-ability and its positive effects—is clearly relational. Teaching is thoroughly relational, and many of its goods are relational: the feeling of safety in a thoughtful teacher's classroom, a growing intellectual enthusiasm in both teacher and student, the challenge and satisfaction shared by both in engaging new material, the awakening sense (for both) that teaching and life are never-ending moral quests.

Most of the goods internal to teaching derive from or serve this first great good, the development of whole persons. A teacher keenly aware of her deep responsibility must continually strive for an appropriately broad competence. She must, of course, be competent in the particular subjects she teaches, but her intellectual competence must reach well beyond her speciality. Many students will have little interest in mathematics, for example, and the mathematics teacher must show interest and at least an elementary competence in other subjects as well. Teaching, of all professions or occupations, is one that can still welcome Renaissance people.

Such broad competence not only enhances the teacher's lessons in her own subject, but also makes it more likely that she will be able to identify and encourage talents outside her field of concentration. Effective mathematics teachers will have far broader cultural knowledge than most mathematics majors. The practice of mathematics does not require broad cultural knowledge as an internal mark of excellence, although individual mathematicians may, of course, possess such knowledge. In contrast, broad cultural knowledge is an internal mark of excellence in teaching, and it is not so important that teachers climb the ladder of mathematics courses to a point far beyond what they will teach. They must understand what they will teach thoroughly and, beyond that, their breadth of knowledge should serve as a model of possibilities for those who would become educated persons. Their respect for other subjects and interests serves as an invitation to all students to explore widely.

We too often associate teaching almost exclusively with competence in one subject, and we expect teachers to 'motivate' students to learn that subject. However, when we look at teaching as a practice, and not just as a means of introducing students to other practices, we see that teachers have a responsibility to find out what actually does motivate students and to encourage those interest when they are worthy (Noddings, 1997). I would not want students to like mathematics or philosophy less as a result of my teaching, but I should not insist that they adopt my interests as their own. That might be my goal as an experienced mathematician mentoring a budding mathematician, but it is not my goal as a teacher. That goal is to help students use my subject effectively for their own legitimate purposes. The hope is that, in working toward this goal, both of our lives will be enriched.

Not only must a teacher acquire and continually extend her store of broad cultural knowledge, she must also be committed to establishing and maintaining relations of care and trust. This is necessary if teachers are to meet responsibility for the development of their students as whole persons. Relations of care and trust also form a foundation for the effective transmission of both general and specialised knowledge. But relations of care and trust are ends in themselves, not simply means to achieve various learnings.

So far I have emphasised internal goods of teaching that, while relational, are directed primarily toward the growth of students. There are, however, goods that benefit teachers, the practitioners. Teaching is

a practice that encourages intellectual growth in its practitioners. Indeed, an important reason for becoming a teacher (second in mention only to the desire to make a difference in the lives of individuals) is to maintain contact with a much-loved subject such as mathematics or literature. Does this suggest, then, that teachers are, after all, members of a practice called mathematics or literature? Perhaps. I did not entirely exclude that possibility in our earlier discussion, but the primary devotion of teachers is to the practice of teaching. One captivated by her discipline may or may not be effective as a teacher. She may begin to present material far beyond the needs and abilities of her students. This energetic and excited move beyond the routine may have wonderful effects on some students but, unhappily, it may also have depressing effects on others. Instead of motivating them ('she is so excited about her subject!'), it may discourage and baffle them. The important point here is that good teachers decide to go ahead or to back off on the basis of the perceived effects of their efforts on students. For these decisions (as we saw in my earlier example), they use criteria of internal excellence in teaching, not those of internal excellence in mathematics.

I have tried to show that teaching is a relational practice—one that has its own distinctive criteria of internal excellence. Moreover, it is a practice that bestows goods on both students and teachers. If my conclusion holds, what does it matter? The emphasis on teaching as a practice might well counteract the tendency to emphasise teaching's failure to achieve full status as a profession. It might make teaching more attractive to people with lively intellectual interests. And it might increase the pride that good teachers feel in doing their work well.

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