

From Teaching to Coaching: Toward an Alternative Conception of Teaching

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Introduction

In searching for a way to make classroom experience more engaging and meaningful, I propose an exploration of a particular type of educational practice, which has been largely ignored or, sometimes, even fought against, in the development of the modern educational system; I will call it “coaching”. This type of practice, or this way of understanding the process of teaching and learning, may seem outdated, but it is still practiced today in such areas as the arts, sports and professional training; and some people have started to recognize its more general value. Donald Schön is a good example and I will draw on his theory of “reflective practitioners” in the following discussion.¹⁾

From teaching to coaching

No one would explicitly support the idea that teachers should be mere conduits of knowledge and that students should be mere receptacles, but there are numerous principles and practices which do not make sense unless we suppose that they are built on these notions. For example, policies about teachers’ “accountability” suggest that teachers are supposed to be accountable to the public for the success of students’ education as measured by how efficiently teachers make students memorize certain prescribed facts.

Van Manen puts it, “The teacher does not just pass on knowledge to the students, he or she embodies what is taught in a personal way”.²⁾ Teachers care, judge, and imagine what is good for the students, show and embody the values which they want to instill in the students, interact with individual students, and coordinate various ideas, expectations, institutional norms, etc., in the process of planning lessons for actual classes. Considering these numerous factors which affect teaching and the complexity of the activities and thought processes which teachers must engage in, the image of the teaching profession seems to me much more than what “teaching” is often taken to suggest. It seems more appropriate to understand teaching in terms of what we usually

think of as “coaching” (and learning in terms of “apprenticing”). This is not to suggest that we have no use of teachers’ “chalk and talk” or students’ memorizing factual information; but I want to suggest that they are neither accurate nor sufficiently comprehensive in describing what is actually going on in the process of teaching and learning.

An interesting case to examine may be the culture of teaching and learning in non-academic fields, such as in the arts, sports, and technical matters. Teaching and learning in these fields tend to be considered in terms of training (rather than education)³⁾, devoid of thinking, reflection, and imagination. Usually, it is considered that the teachable parts in these areas are simple and identifiable skills, and learning them consists of mechanical repetition; and those who excel, in these fields, beyond the level of the application of basic skills are considered to be “talented”, which implies that the excellence cannot be entirely taught.

However, I do not think that these perceptions are justified. First, teaching and learning in these fields involve much more than mindless repetition of basic skills and procedures; and second, while teaching in these areas is often structured by tradition to a larger extent than that of the ordinary classroom, the structure is not as rigid as it is usually assumed. As Hanks writes in his foreword to Lave and Wenger’s *Situated Learning*:

...structure is more the variable outcome of action than its invariant precondition. Preexisting structures may vaguely determine thought, learning, or action, but only in an underspecified, highly schematic way. And the structure may be significantly reconfigured in the local context of action.⁴⁾

Schön’s “reflective practitioner” is precisely a person who can work effectively and flexibly in such a structure, and good coaches or teachers are, in my view, “reflective practitioners”.

Schön’s idea of “reflective practitioners”

In this section, I will describe in some detail the major characteristics of Schön’s idea of “reflective practice”.

Schön says that reflective practitioners possess “artistry”, and describes it as the “competence in the indeterminate zones of practice”. He says it is possessed and exhibited typically by highly successful professionals.

He writes that, traditionally, “systematic, preferably scientific, knowledge”⁵⁾ and “the propositional contents of applied science and scholarship”⁶⁾ have been privileged as the

gist of professional practitioners' expertise (the type of view which has traditionally been called "technical rationality"). However, Schön contends that the expertise of professional practitioners does not consist in the straightforward application of systematic, scientific, and propositional knowledge to problematic situations. The real problem is that the problem does not appear in a clearly determined/determinable way so that specific knowledge could be "applied". Rather, he argues that the core of professional expertise lies in the way that the practitioners combine reflection and action in the actual indeterminate situation, drawing on, but not determined by, the repertoire of concrete knowledge and skill which they have acquired. The integration of reflection and action constitutes their artistry.

The "indeterminate zones of practice" are messy and do not allow the straightforward application of knowledge. Coping with such situations requires that the practitioner reflectively and imaginatively frames the problem and works out possible solutions by drawing on their extensive knowledge in the respective field ("repertoire"). For example, a good teacher has a repertoire of several ways to explain an idea to students according to such variables as the particular student's learning style or level of understanding.⁷⁾ The knowledge aspect of this process of on-the-spot analysis of the task, choice from the repertoire, and improvisation is explained by Schön as "knowing-in-action". And the thought process associated with it is explained by him as "reflection-in-action", which is the practitioner's "thinking what they are doing while they are doing it".⁸⁾ An expert practice is not just an instinctual response to the stimulus, and even if a particular "knowing-in-action" and "reflection-in-action" may appear to be an instantaneous response, it involves highly complicated thinking. Moreover, practitioners' ability to reflect on their own patterns, ways, and frameworks in coping with the problem is also important ("reflection on reflection-in-action").

A large part of the problem with examining the nature of artistry is that some aspects and processes of artistry cannot be described or explained in words even by those who possess it. However, he does not foreclose the understanding of the nature of artistry away to the zone of mystery by explaining it with such obscure terms as "wisdom" and "intuition". Rather, he tries to examine how artistry is employed, how it works, and how it can be taught and learned.⁹⁾

Professional artistry is not dependent on practitioners' ability to "describe what [they] know how to do or even to entertain in conscious thought the knowledge [their] actions reveal".¹⁰⁾ The artistry of a given field can be learned only by actually practicing it, and the part that can be taught and learned via discursive language and logical explanation are limited. Thus, those who want to acquire the artistry of a field must be trained in the "practicum" rather than through lecturing and note-taking. Experiencing/doing something actually establishes the broader context in which learning via the medium of language occurs. He wraps this up by saying that artistry is "learnable, coachable, but not teachable".¹¹⁾

Teaching as coaching¹²⁾

I propose to understand teaching in terms of coaching because the idea of coaching conveys the appreciation of the broader context in which instruction takes place. When a teacher's teaching results in a student's learning beyond the level of mere regurgitation, it includes the student's sharing the teacher's way of experiencing the subject. For example, when a teacher is trying to teach a historical fact or a mathematical equation, it is done against the backdrop of how the teacher interprets, understands, appreciates, and is passionate about the subject. A process of teaching and learning involves, for example, the selection of what facts to teach on the part of the teacher, which involves the act of interpretation, and the interpretation of the teacher's message on the part of the student, which involves the student's experience, imaginative associations, and emotional response. Thus, the teacher's act of teaching should be understood as involving much more than mere handing over of words and symbols, and the student's act of learning should be understood as involving much more than what such words as copying, imitating, and memorizing usually suggest. What the teacher intends to teach is never learned by the student in its entirety, as an object, say a coin, is passed on from one person to another. The teacher can explain and demonstrate to the student, but things explained and demonstrated would almost never be received by the student in the way that the teacher intended. Students selectively and reflectively listen to, interpret, and imitate what the teacher explains and demonstrates, but what they will learn is inevitably limited by what they bring to the situation of learning; for example, temperament, prior knowledge, interest, and imagination. In fact, I believe that an essential part of good teaching lies in the teacher's skill in making students selective, reflective, and imaginative in understanding what the teacher tries to communicate. However, in practice, classroom instruction is often done in a way which negates these aspects for various reasons. Many people - students, parents, teachers, and administrators - are satisfied with the "success" of instruction at the level of what Dewey and Eisner call "recognition" (rather than "appreciation").¹³⁾

The idea of coaching was imbedded in the traditional mode of education, i.e. apprenticeship, though it was not consciously formulated in a theory. Today, this mode of education is found in non-academic and professional/technical fields. In these fields and activities, the instructor, at least in the beginning, appears to the novice as a model to copy, and a model embodies and communicates not only skill and knowledge but the way of living the practice. A good example may be how adolescents imitate the fashion and the behavior of their favorite sport players or their coaches; it is not just skill, but also style and attitude.

**On the characteristics of the coaching/apprenticing relationship (1):
the importance of non-verbal elements**

Below, I will describe a few characteristics of the culture of learning in the fields where understanding teaching in terms of coaching is typically appropriate.

First, coaching and apprenticing neither underestimate nor underutilize such non-verbal elements as feeling, intuition, and appreciation.

For example, Schön explains how feeling or an intuitive grasp is involved in a coaching situation. He says that there are "outer" (i.e. observable) signs of competence which even a novice or a lay person can recognize, and that there are also feelings which arise from doing things properly ("the inner feelings").¹⁴⁾ One of the major tasks in acquiring artistry is to become able to connect the outer signs and the inner feelings, and the coach must help facilitating this process. In almost all cases, novice learners in arts, crafts and technical areas, have some intuitive understanding of what good performances look like. It is not so hard to have some images of what kind of skills are considered excellent. Therefore, they can tell to some extent what the targets are even if they cannot attain them by themselves or cannot describe what concrete skills or processes are involved. Thus, coaches can start by assisting the novice to have a feeling which everyone supposedly has when things are done properly, and afterwards lead them step-by-step. Schön refers to the following example:

A tennis teacher of my acquaintance writes, for example, that he always begins by trying to help his students get the feeling of "hitting the ball right." Once they recognize this feeling, like it, and learn to distinguish it from the various feelings associated with "hitting the ball wrong," they begin to be able to detect and correct their own errors. But they usually cannot, and need not, describe what the feeling is like or by what means they produce it.¹⁵⁾

Novice learners, however, typically find themselves in a situation like Meno's paradox¹⁶⁾; often novices are not certain what to do to start with, or wonders if doing such and such would lead to mastery, but they must plunge into the practice. What concrete items to learn and how to learn them will become clear by actually starting to learn. The kind of assumptions which people like Frederick Taylor and Franklin Bobbitt had - the possibility and importance of identifying specific purposes beforehand - are not really useful or plausible in many educational settings.¹⁷⁾ Although I talked about the relative abundance of intuitive ideas or images of what expert practices may look like which novice learners have in certain areas, it does not mean that how to go about concrete items of the practice is always clear; in many cases, concrete how-tos must be taught by the instructor one by one. In such a situation, the coach's guidance through a relatively formalized process of learning while having an intuitive image or feeling of

the goal seems to be effective.

On the characteristics of the coaching/apprenticing relationship (2): demonstration and imitation

Second, demonstration and imitation. Schön says that coaches “employ a multimedia language of demonstration and description”,¹⁸⁾ and emphasizes the importance of telling/instructing “in the context of the student’s *doing* [i.e. working on a concrete task]”.¹⁹⁾ In “telling” he includes “giving specific instructions”, “criticiz[ing] a student’s process or product”, “analyz[ing] or reformulat[ing] problems”.²⁰⁾ The crucial thing is that there are dialectical interactions, with regard to the concrete material on which they are working, between the coach’s telling and demonstrating on the one hand, and the student’s listening, imitating and doing, on the other. Schön says, “Verbal description can provide clues to the essential features of a demonstration, and demonstration can make clear the kind of performance denoted by a description that at first seems vague or obscure”.²¹⁾

The learning through imitating (by following relatively structured procedures and patterns) is an educational device to help novices. If teachers give their students complete freedom, it is like throwing them into a sea and asking them just to swim; teaching through imitating is like teaching how to breast stroke and then gradually expanding the repertoire of various other ways of swimming. The choice of, for example, breaststroke may be arbitrary to some extent, but it helps the beginner by giving the starting point toward effective swimming.

An important concern with learning by apprenticing is that, on the surface of it, this relationship between the coach and the student may look like a pure imposition from the coach and a mere submission on the part of the student; this image of the instructional relationship is usually disliked because it goes against the idea of autonomy which modern educational ideas especially value. Of course, as it cashes out in practice, it is often true that there are authoritarian teachers who impose and make arbitrary demands. However, a few points need to be made.

(1) As Schön says, though the idea of imitation is disliked, the *practice* of learning inevitably involves imitating. He says that whatever the coach tries to communicate by explaining it by words (telling) or by action (demonstrating), it needs to be interpreted by the student when the student actually puts it into practice; “the student must construct in her own performance what she takes to be the essential feature of the coach’s demonstration”.²²⁾ Also as Ikuta points out, when learners imitate what their teachers do, it involves a judgment or approval on the part of the learners that what their teachers do is worth imitating.²³⁾ Thus, to think of imitating as pure imposition is questionable, because teachers cannot impose unless students consent to accept.

Learning by imitating, in an important sense, is rather built on the learner's autonomous judgment.

(2) Autonomy, in fact, does not mean much unless it is disciplined freedom. Imitation inevitably involves interpretation and what results from imitation is greater autonomy and freedom; as some of the coaches in Schön's examples suggest, the students who have successfully imitated their coaches can always "break it open" or open up the new possibilities.²⁴⁾ There is freedom from copying which is possible only for those who have copied to perfection.

On the characteristics of the coaching/apprenticing relationship (3): issues of personal relationship

Third, the factor of personal relationships between the coach and the apprentice. Learning by apprenticing is learning through the master/coach. As such, some relational and personal factors play a crucial role in making teaching and learning possible.

For example, Schön talks about the "willing suspension of disbelief" on the part of the apprentice. Learners are expected to trust their coaches for a reasonably extended period of time and invest their time and effort, even if they do not see the tangible result immediately.

A downside of this arrangement is that there are possibilities of "a learning bind", where the relation between the coach and the student is jeopardized because of miscommunication and resulting mistrust; a learning bind typically happens when coaches fail to see the problems and difficulties which their students are having, insisting on their (the coaches') criteria, methods and perspective, and when students take coaches' advice as a personal attack, failing to appreciate the coaches' educational intention.²⁵⁾ In these cases, both sides tend to become defensive, taking what the other says as an attack, rather than a constructive criticism.

Unlike business transactions, the end-results of an educational relationship are hardly clear when it starts. Here, trust in the coach needs to be built up, and this is an aspect of interpersonal relationship which some major principles and practices of education tend to disregard or avoid. Conversely, this implies that teachers must strive to become those who deserve trust from their students and from their parents.

An implication of Schön's inner/outer signs of competence

Our criterion for judging competent practitioners from incompetent ones tends to be the product or result of the practice. But Schön thinks that excellent practitioners have

characteristic *processes* of performing the task. He says, "a physician who regularly makes accurate diagnosis or a lawyer who regularly wins cases has a characteristic way of going about the process of diagnosis or litigation".²⁶⁾ Schön's attention to the process has an important implication to understanding the nature of education. The value of education/instruction tends to be measured by the tangible product (as typically seen in standardized exams). People tend to look to the product, because it is tangible, measurable, and explicable. However, Schön's perspective calls our attention to things that are not so tangible. Things that are largely implicit are given theoretical recognition in his idea.

Teachers should embody educatedness

Now we might as well examine teaching and learning of academic subjects in school by using the previous discussion.

First, in contrast to the fields where coaching/apprenticing is common, there are not many models to imitate in typical classrooms and in academic subjects. Teaching and learning in academic subjects in the ordinary classroom is constructed in such a way as to eliminate the human elements which teaching and learning in the arts and sports are built around. For example, teachers' passion about the subjects or their personal views and attitudes toward the subjects are considered, at best, irrelevant, and at worst, a hindrance to the teaching and learning of them. For various reasons, it is in fact hard to find good models in ordinary school subjects who show what it may look like to be a passionate practitioner in the field. In such non-academic fields as the arts and sports, the learner/apprentice is introduced into the culture of the field where the coach/master is also a learner of the field. In contrast, in typical classrooms today, teachers are not themselves learners who appreciate and seek to understand the culture of the subjects (I certainly do not mean to suggest that this is entirely teachers' fault).

Second, in the educational scheme where students' learning is measured only by multiple-choice or short-answer exams, the dialectical relations between the teacher's telling/demonstrating and the student's interpreting/imitating are not necessary. The popular practice of assessing the student's mastery at the level of verbal recognition and reproduction may be convenient because the "product" of teaching and learning can be measured in a tangible form. However, this practice brings about numerous problems which we commonly observe in schooling. One of them is that neither the teacher nor the student can be sure, even to a reasonable extent, whether the things supposedly "learned" are really learned (To be able to use a certain word does not necessarily mean that it is understood).

The third point I want to make is, as Garrison says, that teaching requires personal connection,²⁷⁾ because the values in education must be found out in concrete situations

and interactions. Teaching is not a one-way giving of valuable things from the teacher to the student. Educational theorists have written about this from various perspectives; Dewey's idea of an end as an "end in view" and Schön's rejection of "technical rationality" speak to this problem.

Thus, while coaching/apprenticing emphasizes solid structure and content, it does not intend to be a one-way imposition which predetermines what the student will achieve. Exploration and experiment on the part of the learner have a certain place in this mode of education. Good coaches often let learners experiment (though it may be within a certain boundary), and they guide their students through concrete activities.²⁸⁾

Garrison points out that teachers' "caring" about their students should not imply mere sentiments.²⁹⁾ He says, "Mere sentimentality is often simply an escape from hard work and harder thinking. There is a logic to loving well". I take this to mean that it is not enough for teachers to be merely sympathetic or affectionate; teachers, motivated by their affection and sympathy toward their students, must open the possibility for their students by helping them acquire tools to become educated. With regard to the subjects taught in school, I think that the subjects which teachers teach are particular tools which they can give to their students for this purpose, because the subjects are, while there are some arbitrary or institutional aspects, each in different ways, the tools which human beings have worked out (and continue to do so) to enlarge their experience and possibilities; each subject is, in a different way, a way to understand and appreciate the world and society in which we live. Teachers should be passionate about the subjects they teach, and they should help their students feel some sense of their passion.

Conclusion

There are teachers who are fascinated by the subjects they teach but very poor at explaining the material to students or at engaging students; the kind of teachers who cannot see the material from students' point of view. Nevertheless, I find it more serious that many teachers do not embody the fun, utility, and value of the subjects they teach, and do not present themselves as being in pursuit of the subjects. This seems to be the biggest difference between the teaching in academic subjects in school and the teaching in the arts, sports, and professional areas. Many learners start learning by imitating the models they see, and they not only imitate concrete skills or learn information but also imitate and learn the whole culture the models embody. In contrast, school subjects are disembodied and cultureless; students typically do not find anything that they want to imitate. This is why mastery of the content of many subjects, when students are made to do them, looks like arbitrary imposition. Learning in school does not engage students' imaginations, because students do not believe that

they will become something more than what they are now by learning these subjects. They do not see the image of an educated person they may be able to become. The key to engage students in their own education, therefore, seems to be whether teachers are able and willing to embody educatedness which their students would want to acquire.

Notes

- 1) Donald A. Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1987).
- 2) Max Van Manen, *The Tact of Teaching: The Meaning of Pedagogical Thoughtfulness* (London, Ontario, Canada: The Althouse Press, 1993), 77.
- 3) Richard S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London, U.K.: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.), Chapter 1.
- 4) William F. Hanks, in Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17-8.
- 5) Schön, 14.
- 6) Ibid., 16.
- 7) Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc., 2002), 123.
- 8) Schön, Preface.
- 9) Ibid., 13; cf. also, Eisner, 156.
- 10) Schön, 22.
- 11) Ibid., 158.
- 12) There are few references to the idea of teaching as coaching; for example, Ernest L. Boyer, *High School: A report on secondary education in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), Theodore R.Sizer, *Horace's Compromise: The dilemma of the American High School* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984). Bruner, too, suggests a similar idea when he says, "The teacher is not only a communicator but a model". See, Jerome Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960/1977), 90.
- 13) Eisner, 216; John Dewey, *Democracy and Education, in The Middle Works*, vol. 9 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985).
- 14) Schön, 87-8.
- 15) Ibid., 24.
- 16) Ibid., p.83; Plato, *Meno*, in *Protagoras and Meno*, W.K.C.Guthrie (Trans.), (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books Ltd., 1966), 80c-80e.
- 17) Eisner, 15, 115, 155-6.
- 18) Schön, 209.

- 19) Ibid., 102, italics in original.
- 20) Ibid., 101.
- 21) Ibid., 112. We may also consider Lave and Wenger's description of the two functions of "talk". One is for procedural purposes (exchange information, focusing or shifting attention, etc.) and the other is for cultural purposes (such as "stories" and "community lore", which "[support] communal forms of memory and reflection, as well as signaling membership" ; 109). What Schön calls "telling" is close to the procedural aspect of talk in Lave and Wenger, but we should understand the coach's "telling" to include cultural aspect too.
- 22) Schön, 214; also, 120-1 where he talks about "reflective imitation".
- 23) Kumiko Ikuta, *Waza Kara Shiru [Knowing Through Art]* (Tokyo, Japan: University of Tokyo Press, 2000), 27-8, 32.
- 24) E.g. Schön, 151-4.
- 25) E.g., *ibid.*, 125-37.
- 26) *Ibid.*, 211.
- 27) Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Erôs* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 170.
- 28) Eisner too uses the word "artistry". He points out the importance of exploration, risk-taking and play in learning, and that good teachers' "artistry" consists in allowing students to explore, take risks and play (162).
- 29) Garrison, 59, 68-9.