

## Teachers, Writers, Actors, Artists: Why They Learn from What They Do

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It is obvious that teaching, writing, acting, and creating works of art are psychotherapeutic activities: people who ply these trades can learn about their own personalities and as a result may change their inner feelings and outer behaviors. Something else professionals obviously learn through experience is how to improve the effectiveness with which they deliver service.

Less obvious, perhaps, is the fact that cognitive content or subject matter is learned through the act of simplifying and organizing it for presentation. Subject matter is learned through the prodding of student questions or audience criticisms. Discoveries in subject matter and technique are fostered through the natural momentum of ideas leading to other ideas in the midst of vocal, written, or manual expression.

A teacher can learn more from his introductory-level courses than from his advanced ones. Introductory-level students ask questions and make criticisms that are startlingly simple and naively profound. One must ponder subject matter deeply and analyze it precisely when preparing to reduce it to its simplest elements for presentation to beginning students or lay consumers. The purpose of this essay is to describe all these phenomena in greater detail and to offer the outlines of explanations for them.

We expect that students will learn from their teachers. That is why we have schools and pay salaries to teachers. But there is something

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besides pay which motivates teachers. Just as students learn from teachers, so teachers learn from their students. Since any living creature learns from any experience it has, there is nothing surprising about the fact that teachers learn from the experience of teaching. What might be surprising is how much and what kinds of things the teacher is learning.

Sometimes a teacher learns from his students the same things an actor learns from his audience. Teaching is a performance which can be analyzed aesthetically.<sup>1</sup> Students respond to a teacher's personal and pedagogical style as displayed in dress, tone of voice, candor, openness to conflicting views, lecture or independent study format, etc. Students also respond aesthetically to the cognitive content of what is taught: a sequence of ideas may be appreciated for its simplicity, elegant economy, reconciliation of apparent opposites, or heuristic facilitation of an unstated discovery. The students' response to their teacher's performance informs the teacher how that performance is being received. The teacher is in effect being praised or criticized for his personal or pedagogical style or for his selection and organization of content.

Teachers do not often distinguish between personal and pedagogical styles. They tend to use a pedagogical style that is a spontaneous or "natural" manifestation of their personalities. Thus, they are likely to respond to praise or criticism of style with personal satisfaction or distress, since they regard it as a reflection on their human worthiness. By contrast, an actor exercises more conscious control over style. He tries to adopt a style befitting the character he portrays. He also gradually develops a more subtle and general style of acting which comes to characterize his public or professional image and which remains a stable, recognizable underpinning for the widely different roles he plays (e.g., type-casting is one possible consequence of this process). An actor can regard criticism of his style professionally: perhaps the audience dislikes the character, or the way the actor renders the character, or the actor's professional image. But such criticism need not touch the actor's sense of selfhood.

This comparison between actors and teachers leads to some conclusions about what teachers can learn from their students. To the extent that a teacher's pedagogical style is "natural" or not chosen deliberately, it is an authentic outgrowth of his person. Thus student response will be taken in a deeply personal way. Teachers may be elated or crushed by student response far more than actors may be affected by audience response. In this way teachers can become aware of their

values and personality dispositions. Since youngsters are notoriously direct and honest in showing feelings, teachers have an excellent source of feedback. In a sense, then, teachers can learn from students some of the things that patients learn about themselves from psychiatrists.

A second conclusion from the comparison between actors and teachers is that teachers could choose to distinguish more clearly between their pedagogical and personal styles as a way of learning from their students how to improve their pedagogical effectiveness. Teachers, that is, could adopt teaching styles in the way actors adopt acting styles. Criticism and praise would then help teachers discover which elements of which styles are most suitable for which types of students and subject matter.

Both student and teacher may distinguish between cognitive content, the way the content is selected and organized, the teacher's pedagogical style, and the teacher's personal style. Students (and teachers) may dislike content but appreciate the way it is taught, just as an audience (and actor) may dislike a villain but appreciate the way an actor portrays him. Even abstract subject matter has an aesthetic dimension.<sup>2</sup> The teacher cannot take credit or blame for the beauty or ugliness of the subject matter, but he does deserve credit or blame for the beauty or ugliness of his presentation of it. By appreciating the intrinsic beauty of his subject matter, a teacher can obtain clues on how to present it inspiringly. Even Greek tragedies are meant to be enjoyed!

Although it is true that students rarely boo or hiss and almost never applaud, they do give clear signals in the form of frowns, smiles, "discipline problems," punctual attendance, properly done homework, etc. The thrill an actor gets from the crowd's applause at the end of a good performance may be emotionally stimulating, but it is not the main source of what he learns. Good actors say they can feel the changing mood of an audience in the midst of performing. So it is with good teachers. There is a feeling of responsiveness and control. Acting and teaching can be like exercising a creative skill such as painting, weaving, or pottery-making. Teachers, actors, and artists receive pleasure from the immediacy with which they learn the consequences of their actions as well as from the spectator's final applause.

For me visual artist in particular, greater long-term improvement in competence is gained from immediate consequences in the course of performing than from any direct or implied criticism that comes later. The artist is his own most severe critic and will often rip up or fail to complete something which "isn't going right." Of course artists are

happy when people buy their work. Certainly artists learn from the comments of professional critics or even the casual remarks of laymen. But the process of creation is itself the main source of both enjoyment and learning. No doubt actors and teachers are more dependent upon audience response for what they learn than artists, but actors and teachers do learn from the process of performing even apart from audience response.

Writing — especially for scholarly publication — is a form of teaching in which the students are not immediately present and their responses remain largely unknown. In this sense writing is like painting or pottery-making, while face-to-face teaching is like acting. The fact that an author knows there is an audience, even if it remains unseen, causes him to take care to write clearly and truthfully, because eventually he will be held accountable. But the remoteness of a writer's audience ensures that what he learns from writing must come almost entirely from the activity of writing and not from audience response.

As a writer, I have often had to wrestle with words until I was able to express my ideas with some degree of accuracy. The halting, stumbling character of the present essay may be due to the fact that I am even now trying simultaneously to convey ideas and to watch closely so as to be able to analyze the process whereby I do this. In the course of writing various essays I have discovered things which never would have occurred to me ahead of time, no matter how long I thought or how many outlines I made. The act of writing is somehow cathartic — it draws ideas out of the mind just as paper seems to suck ink out of a pen. Once a sequence of ideas begins to get expressed, the very expressing of them seems to lead inexorably toward new ideas that might not otherwise have been imagined. Artists discover new shapes, color combinations, or techniques that seem to be required to complete work already begun.

Actors, and teachers addressing live audiences, also learn from the natural momentum of self-expression. However, the momentum of ideas leading to ideas is silent and may be ignored in the face of the potentially more noisy demands of a live audience. The presence of the audience discourages the wish to "go off on a tangent." Nevertheless, actors and classroom teachers do learn and discover things from the momentum of ideas and can sometimes recall those things after the audience has departed. Some teachers keep note cards handy to facilitate such recall at the earliest possible moment; other teachers tape-record their lectures and save the tapes for a few days "just in case."

It seems odd that subject matter can be learned or discovered simply by writing or teaching or making something when there is no external response. How can a person learn something he did not know merely by writing or speaking what he already knew? One answer is provided by Plato's doctrine of recollection. In the dialogue *Meno*, a devil's advocate suggests that we can never discover anything new. If we already know something, then it would not be new or a discovery; and if we do not know something, then there would be no way of recognizing it even if we stumble over it. To counter this argument, Plato says that there is a kind of primordial knowledge buried in our minds from before birth, but this knowledge is forgotten. Experience or teachers can stimulate us to remember forgotten knowledge, whereupon we say we have discovered it. It *seems* new to us, but it is not really new at all (which is why we can recognize it at the time of "discovery"). What we do by ourselves can jog our memories just as well as a teacher's lesson or an organized field experience. Plato's doctrine of recollection, then, provides one explanation of why the momentum of ideas can help a writer or teacher "discover" subject matter even when there is no audience response.

Another explanation can be found by examining the relationship between wholes and parts.<sup>3</sup> Every skill, idea, or attitude can be thought of as a whole entity composed of parts. Although a whole can be known as a whole, it can only be taught by breaking it down into its parts. Wholes cannot be transferred directly from one mind to another (except in cases of "psychic" phenomena). If a person has a skill, an idea, or an attitude he wishes to communicate, he must break it into subskills, subconcepts, examples, or individual behaviors. These bits and pieces are presented one by one in a sequence designed to help the "student" reassemble them into the whole which the "teacher" is trying to express. Teaching and learning are therefore opposite processes: teaching is unpacking or breaking down, learning is assembling or building up. Teaching is the act of reducing a complex entity into simple components, and learning is the act of mastering simple components and integrating them into complex patterns.

A teacher or writer who intuitively grasps the totality of a skill, idea, or attitude must struggle to analyze it into its constituent elements. He must struggle further to arrange these elements in a heuristic sequence that will lead a student to reassemble them correctly. Thus the act of teaching or writing forces us to take apart what we know and analyze its inner workings. In this way we come to know our subject matter more intimately and feel a sense of deeper mastery or control

over it. We put our knowledge under a microscope and watch what happens to it when we manipulate its components. Close observation of the disassembled components gives us an opportunity to reassemble them into new configurations. Indeed, random reassembly may occasionally lead to valid configurations even without the exercise of intelligent judgment. The creative problem-solving technique called "brainstorming" can be thought of as a deliberate attempt to produce random configurations of basic elements without interference from stifling initial judgments. Through intimate awareness of usually inconspicuous elements or through reintegration of those elements into new configurations, teaching or writing can teach us seemingly new subject matter even in the absence of audience response.

As mentioned earlier, the fact that students are being addressed even when they are not actually present and their responses are remote or unobservable, makes a teacher or author take care to be clear and truthful, because he may eventually be held accountable. Even though an author writes in solitude, he takes pains to break down his subject matter into easily intelligible pieces to suit the abilities and interests of his unseen audience; and it is this process of analysis (which would be unnecessary without an audience) that teaches the author subject matter that seems new.

An active audience can be a far greater source of learning. With such an audience, there is not only the (possibly remote) accountability for truth or clarity involved in writing, but also an immediate and continuing demand for direct responses to unanticipated, specific questions. Student criticism teaches the teacher that he needs to be more precise or to break down a concept or skill into simpler elements, and sometimes criticism forces a teacher to reconsider whether his teachings are true.

Introductory-level classes can be more instructive to a teacher than advanced ones, because at the introductory level a teacher must break down his subject matter into especially simple and clearly expressed elements. The stark simplicity and naive profundity of student questions at the introductory level pose an exciting challenge, which focuses a scholar's attention on the most basic (and hence profound) issues in the subject he teaches. Serious scholars have a way of becoming so specialized and so deeply involved in their subject matter that they often forget the most important, simple, and basic questions that constitute the origin of all their research. To be reminded of such questions is often a shock that helps the scholar integrate and synthesize new insights at a deeper level.

For example, I once had divided a freshman college class into groups, with the requirement that each student give a research report to be graded by the other members of his group. One student came to see me privately, complaining that she thought this procedure unfair. She said she would be doing extensive research into a complex topic, and her fellow students would not be qualified to grade her. She thought I should grade her.

This incident stimulated me to think about whether a teacher is indeed any more qualified to give grades than students in cases where someone's research work goes beyond the teacher's knowledge. And this latter question led me to consider whether a "normal" teacher should grade a "gifted" child, whether professors are competent to judge the work of a doctoral candidate whose dissertation extends the boundaries of knowledge, and whether the average citizen in a democracy is competent to judge which of two disagreeing experts is right. These questions in turn led me to confront the very deep philosophical question of whether and how one person can know whether another person has knowledge of something — especially under circumstances when the first person does not himself have the knowledge that the second person claims to have. A year after my student confronted me with her apparently simple criticism, I finished writing an article about all these things, and after another year the article was published.<sup>4</sup>

My concern with grading continued. About a year after that article was published and when I was teaching at a different university, another freshman in a philosophy of education class questioned whether I had a moral right to give her a grade on her philosophy of education. After all, she said, it was one opinion against another. So I thought about the issue, wrote her a three- or four-page note explaining my response, and on second thought made a photocopy of the note in order to think about it further. A year and a half later I published what I still regard as one of my most insightful articles, in defense of the traditional grading system.<sup>5</sup> Since then I have taught special courses on the philosophical, social, psychological, and historical issues involved in grading and have used both of the articles mentioned above as "texts." Naive student questions and the catharsis of writing have similarly prompted thought, publication, and course designs on other topics, but I will spare the reader any further autobiographical excursions.

This essay has identified several kinds of things teachers can learn from students or from the sheer act of teaching. Teachers can learn

about their own personalities and as a result may change their inner values and outer behaviors. Teachers learn how to improve the effectiveness with which they help students learn. Teachers learn subject matter through the act of simplifying and organizing it for presentation, through the prodding of student questions and criticisms, and through the natural momentum of ideas leading to other ideas in the midst of vocal or written expression. Indeed, the only kind of teacher who could not learn anything from students or from teaching would be a righteous and wise guru who possesses infallible total knowledge of himself and his subject matter. Such a guru might still teach, because he feels a stewardship obligation to help his fellow creatures or to exercise his custodianship of knowledge. He might teach for the sheer joy of self-expression, much as a good artist feels a need to express himself or to create. Why a Socrates or a Jesus or a Buddha teaches is a deeper mystery than we can probe here, but it seems clear that only gurus such as these could fail to learn through teaching.

#### Notes

1. Kenneth R. Conklin, "The Aesthetics of Knowing and Teaching," *Teachers College Record* 72, no. 2 (Dec. 1970):257-65.
2. Conklin, "The Aesthetic Dimension of Education in the Abstract Disciplines," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 4, no. 3 (July 1970):31-36.
3. Conklin, "Wholes and Parts in Teaching," *The Elementary School Journal* 74, no. 3 (Dec. 1973):165-71.
4. Conklin, "Educational Evaluation and Intuition," *Educational Forum* 34, no. 3 (Mar. 1970):323-32.
5. Conklin, "Due Process in Grading: Bias and Authority," *School Review* 81, no. 1 (Nov. 1972):85-95.