

Synopsis: *The Act of Teaching: Reflections on a Basic Human Act*  
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This book on the activity of teaching differs from every other book on teaching that I am aware of. Every book I have ever seen on teaching begins with the assumption that teaching is what schoolteachers do. If other cases of teaching are allowed, they are treated as lesser cases of what schoolteachers do. I argue from thousands of years of history and the most common meaning of teaching around the world today that teaching is an act that every human being performs. Teaching is also performed by many animals and I argue that teaching can be extended to the nonhuman world. Most teaching is by nonhumans, most teaching by humans is communal, and most teaching by humans is nonverbal.

I published the earlier version of this book with the title: “*Showing How: The Act of Teaching.*” Looking at the book twenty-two years later, I realize that I assumed it would be easy for a reader to join me in what I was exploring. Although I still think that the title accurately represents the meaning of teaching, namely, “to show someone how to do something,” I realize that without a context, the title does not get through to people. I find that it is extremely difficult to get people to realize that by teaching I am not exclusively or mainly talking about the people called teachers in our society, that is, schoolteachers.

In this revised edition of the book, I have moved the subtitle to the title, *The Act of Teaching*. The subtitle is equally important: *Reflection on a Basic Human Act*. The picture on the book’s cover is intended to show that teaching begins with a mother’s activities toward a newborn infant. Humans are born with no knowledge but an almost limitless capacity to learn. The mother and everybody and everything in the environment teach the child everything that it comes to do and to know. The teacher shows the potential learner how to do something; the teacher and learner succeed together or fail together. Teaching-learning is a single activity seen from opposite ends.

The book is a study of language. Like all twenty-nine of my books, it is an advocacy of the most historically accurate, theoretically consistent, and helpfully practical meaning of a term (other examples of my books are on: development, responsibility, human rights, nonviolent action). The aim of my books is not to convince the reader of some theory of mine but to make a better conversation possible about a complex and often disputed term. The meaning of the verb “to teach” is one that people seem comfortable with; they presume it is what they were

exposed to in a classroom. It is shocking that there is so little reflection on the idea of teaching itself in the history of philosophy and among professors in universities.

The book traces two competing philosophical traditions on the implied meaning of teaching. As frequently happens in philosophy, it is not the case that one tradition is true and the other false. Instead one tradition is more comprehensive and consistent than the other. The second tradition can include the best of the first. I trace the first tradition to Socrates and the second to Aristotle.

Socrates questions whether a wise man can transmit what he knows to a potential learner. Socrates denies that is possible. He denies (ironically) that he is a teacher because the truth lies within the potential learner. The person called teacher can only question and challenge the student to discover the truth already within the student.

In the first chapter I give a brief summary of moments in the first tradition after Socrates. I concentrate on the beginning of modern science and the 1960s when there was a spate of books on teaching. The second tradition is described in the remaining seven chapters.

For Aristotle, teaching-learning is an instance of his relation between act and potency. Teaching-learning is a single activity that happens in the learner. Whatever activates the capacity to learn in animals, including human animals, is a teacher. There are not many philosophers I can cite for this tradition but its strength is that it goes back thousands of years. From time immemorial, parents have taught their children, workmen have taught apprentices, political and religious leaders have taught the members of their communities. Also, mother birds have taught baby birds, and the mountain has taught lessons to mountain climbers.

Why insist on the word teaching for describing all these situations? Because it provides a continuity in understanding human actions. This tradition provides a world of examples that precede “academic teaching.” When teaching is assigned to a group of people called teachers who work in schools, their work is without a context of teaching. It is a case of trying to build the roof of a building when there is no frame or foundation. A schoolteacher works with students who are already being taught by numerous other factors and people. The students in a classroom are always learning but not necessarily what the person at the front of the room is intending to teach. An academic teacher’s problem is how to intervene effectively in the student’s life which is filled with teachers.

The book moves from the most physical kinds of teaching-learning to the most abstract. An infant starts by learning almost everything through physical contact and sounds. The infant almost immediately starts trying to enter the human conversation. It associates the sound of the human voice as accompanying activities such as being fed or put to bed. A parent or another adult first uses language by giving specific directions. The interplay of verbal and nonverbal elements continues throughout life. Language is gradually abstracted from the physical world, including one's body. Eventually, one can examine language by using language which can make one forget about the root of language in physical action.

I describe the steps in teaching-learning when a physical skill is learned. I use examples of teaching someone to ski, to cook, to swim, to use a computer. The same process can be seen to apply when teaching is done by a classroom teacher: 1) the student acts 2) the teacher studies how the student acts 3) the teacher proposes a redesign of the student's action 4) the student tries out the redesign

When speech is isolated for the purpose of teaching, there are three families of teaching languages. Each family has 3 examples. The first family, which I call rhetorical, includes storytelling, preaching, and lecturing. They have the aim of getting people to act in a particular way. Teaching is illegitimate if it not matched with the proper setting. Preaching is obviously something done in church; I argue that politicians are also preachers, though they would not like the word. Lecturing is something else politicians sometimes do. One place that I think lecturing is illegitimate is in a classroom.

The second family called therapeutic is a counterpoint to the rhetorical languages. The concern is not to move the will to action but to restore the power to will when there is an obstacle. Thus, "confess-forgive" is a powerful and sometimes necessary act of teaching-learning. Similarly, "grieving-comforting" may at other times be needed.

The third family called conversational, includes debate and academic criticism. The teacher and the learner have an exchange of language about knowledge which they both possess. The instructor is presumably more knowledgeable about the subject but he or she might still learn from the student. The classroom instructor's main task is to ask, "what do the words mean?" That may sound appropriate only for graduate students but little children who have not lost a fascination with words are sometimes better at this question.

I describe the main settings in which teaching-learning occurs, such as the family and the workplace. When I finally come to the school, I distinguish between classroom instruction where academic criticism should dominate and the many other ways that teaching occurs, for example in the music room, the ball field, or the cafeteria. Students are taught by each other, by the school staff and by the physical environment. The school is a main setting for teaching but “school teaching” is not a kind of teaching; classroom instruction is.

The book is not especially intended for schoolteachers, but it could be helpful to them. Many teachers in elementary school have a good sense of the steps in teaching and they are aware of the physical basis of all teaching. Many professors in universities have seldom reflected on the nature of teaching. They read their scholarly notes to students who copy down what the professor says for a later examination. It is scandalous that there is so little discussion and debate about the nature of teaching.