Review Essay

Passmore's Teaching

Professors of Education are like everyone else in that
sometimes their peaceful nights are interrupted by nightmares.
I suspect, however, that unlike others, their nightmares take on
the especially menacing form of a hostile public asking why
they exist at all. To make matters worse, these disturbing
apparitions often do not go away with the approaching dawn,
but audaciously make an appearance in the guise of
embarrassing questions asked by a student-teacher, frustrated by
what appears to have little or no bearing upon classroom
practice. To this double threat of public enmity and
embarrassing questions there has been added the argument of
the deschoolers, who urge the dismantling of the public schools
and claim that there is no need for professional teachers since
children learn best from their peers and elders.

To some Professors of Education the need to erect
unbreachable barriers against this three-headed **bete noire** of
disturbed sleep may be a new thing, but for the philosophers of
education it is something of an ongoing pre-occupation. The
explanation of this tendency of philosophers towards
self-examination may in part be due to their adherence to the
Socratic dictum about the worthlessness of the unexamined life.
But it may also be due to the fact that many students who find
themselves taking a philosophy course for the first time need to
be convinced that philosophy matters, since most of them share
the general public's conviction that it doesn't. This is especially
true of philosophy of education, whose reputation even among

fellow philosophers is not exactly high. Philosophers of education have spent considerable time, effort, and ingenuity trying to convince their philosophical co-workers that philosophical work in education can meet the most exacting standards; while also attempting to convince others, especially teachers, that philosophy can make a substantive contribution to educational practice. Satisfying the demands of both rigour and relevance has not been easy, nor has there been consensus on the degree to which success has been obtained.

When it comes to an examination of the concept of teaching, the distance between the everyday concerns of educators and the more or less Olympian stance of much current philosophy of education has remained as great as ever. It is always a hopeful sign, however, when a philosopher of the calibre of John Passmore devotes his attention to converting hitherto remote starlight into a philosophical searchlight which can seek out and illumine issues of importance to teachers. In his recent book, The Philosophy of Teaching, Passmore makes an important contribution which should enable teachers to monitor and if necessary modify their teaching practices. In this essay I want first to describe his approach to teaching and then give an example of its application; finally I will be raising a problem about the limits of what can be taught, in the light of my example.

The concept of "teaching"

While most philosophical work on the concept of teaching has been largely preoccupied with problems of formal definition, the resultant definitions have, according to Passmore, remained benign in their effects largely because they have made no difference for good or ill to the solution of any significant pedagogical problem. To think that we cannot sensibly employ any term without first defining it amounts to what Passmore calls the Socratic fallacy. Unlike the term "education", the term "teaching" does not create those ambiguities which it is important to eliminate by formal definition. Whether "teaching" is taken to mean "trying to teach" or "successful teaching", usually "the context makes it clear what is meant or the ambiguity is of no consequence; nothing rests on it" (p.21).

Consider now the less than benign view of teaching which gets embedded in such administratively convenient (but pedagogically disastrous) policies as transferring the music teacher to the teaching of chemistry if it so happens that there is a shortage of chemistry teachers. Such practices are often based upon the belief that "to teach" refers to a single specific skill which one can do well or badly no matter what it is one is teaching, so long as one keeps ahead of the students. But, says Passmore, this view of teaching overlooks the simple logical

observation that teaching is a triadic relation; that is, to teach
is to teach something to somebody. The "something" anJ the
"somebody" make as much difference to success or failure in
teaching as the type of disease and the type of patient do to
success or failure in that other triadic relation, "curing". To
emphasize the triadic nature of teaching will remind us, says
Passmore, that there is no single type of test or set of tests
which can be applied to all teachers.

What has been taught?

We are now getting closer to Passmore's own views about
how philosophy can contribute to pedagogical practice. Suppose
a teacher wants to know whether his or her students have
understood what has been taught. Is it a significant test of
their understanding if they reproduce what the teacher has said?
Or is it more significant to determine how and whether their
behaviour has changed? Or yet again, do we test for
understanding by seeing whether students are capable of applying
what has been taught to new situations? Are there different
tests which vary in accordance with differences in what is
understood; that is, do tests differ when what is taught is a
sentence rather than a theory or a rule?

Both teacher and philosopher have a keen interest in the
notion of "understanding". Obviously a successful analysis of
what it means to understand something would not only satisfy a
traditional philosophical question but would also contribute to
classroom practice. Passmore claims that teacher and
philosopher not only meet at the concept of "understanding", but
at a whole host of other notions as well. Among the sorts of
"things" which a teacher seeks to teach are capacities, skills,
information, habits, and imagination. Any familiarity with
philosophy quickly reveals that these "things" also feature as the
staples of any philosophical diet. It is Passmore's claim that an
examination of these concepts constitutes a philosophy of
teaching, and insofar as teachers need to monitor their work in
terms of a clearer understanding of these concepts, the
philosophy of teaching can make a significant contribution to
classroom practice.

Among the "things" which teachers teach, Passmore
considers such items as capacities, information, habits,
imagination, critical-mindedness, carefulness, and understanding,
in the second part of his book. Such things are taught, in the
sense that capacities can be developed, information imparted,
and both habits and imagination can be cultivated. What
principle guides Passmore in the determination of this list, and
whether he regards it as fairly exhaustive, are not made clear.
Certain things which one might regard as certainly teachable,
like facts, are considered in terms of information, as are other

concepts of importance to philosophers such as observation and experience. Similarly skills, which certainly could be viewed as one of the things which can be taught, are viewed in terms of capacities. What determines eligibility as a candidate for discussion then seems to be the combination of teachability and the persistent efforts of philosophers to say something about the concept.

An example: becoming "critical"

In the one example so far given, the concept of "understanding", its pedagogical usefulness lies in aiding teachers to monitor their success in getting students to understand various things. I now want to consider a different example, namely Passmore's examination of "being critical". One reason for considering this example is that it offers an enlarged view of the impact philosophical analyses of teachable "things" can have upon classroom practice. Whereas the philosophical examination of the concept of "understanding" offers guidance in the monitoring of teaching success, Passmore's analysis of "being critical" allows a teacher to develop a pedagogical principle for his or her guidance in promoting critical-mindedness. Taking a look at Passmore's views about critical-mindedness will also allow us, in the last section, to raise important questions about the limits of what can be taught.

For Passmore, teaching a person to be critical is not simply a matter of imparting information, inculcating habits, or training in a particular sort of skill, but chiefly a matter of forming a person's character. Merely having information about criticism or being skillful at certain kinds of performance is insufficient, since one may have both the information and the skill relevant to being critical and yet never be disposed to use it. A person who is critical-minded is both able and willing to criticise, without cavil or loss of imagination.

Passmore notes that engendering such a character trait involves more than inculcating standards (in terms of which students may appraise their own behaviour as well as the behaviour of others). Adherence to such standards may be perfectly compatible with certain forms of authoritarianism, whereas critical-mindedness is not. What a teacher has to do, in addition to demanding that students perform in terms of high standards, is to encourage them to be "alert to the possibility that the established norms themselves ought to be rejected, the rules ought to be changed, the criteria used in judging performances modified. Or perhaps even that the mode of performance ought not to take place at all" (p.170).

Problems, not exercises: a principle

Passmore says that the "crucial principle seems to be: wherever possible and as soon as possible, substitute problems for exercises" (p.178). In order to understand this principle and how Passmore derives it from his analysis of critical-mindedness, we shall have to consider his distinction between problems and exercises, as well as another distinction he makes between open and closed capacities.

If I do not know any chess pieces or how to move them, I can hardly be a critical-minded chess player. Nor could I become such a player if I did not receive some training in the routine moves of the game. Teaching students to be critical-minded in any given domain requires teaching them the rules and routines of that domain, and in so far as such rules and routines can be completely mastered, students in learning them acquire capacities which Passmore calls "closed".

But learning to engage in any complex activity is not simply a matter of acquiring the rules and routines. Consider learning how to speak French. When I go beyond using stock phrases and start using sentences and phrases to express what I wish to say, I can then be said to know how to speak French. To acquire such an ability is to go beyond what a student has been explicitly instructed and trained in, for it is to acquire a capacity for inventiveness within French. For Passmore, such a capacity is "open"; it is not reducible to mastery of the rules and routines of the given domain.

Being critical-minded within a given domain is to have a capacity which is "open". But how can a teacher develop such a capacity? Mastery of the rules and routines of any activity can be brought about by the use of what Passmore calls "exercises". To give a student an "exercise" is to give a task where the rules or routines to be applied to the situation are obvious (or can be made so: e.g., telling a student to use the imperfect subjunctive in translating a list of English sentences into French). To develop critical-mindedness the teacher must go beyond the routines by giving "problems". In the latter case the student's task is such that "the student cannot at once decide what rule to apply or how it applies" (p.178) - e.g., the translation of a passage of English into French.

Only honest people have moral problems

Passmore derives his pedagogical principle by considering the sort of tasks which logically presuppose critical-mindedness for their successful completion. There is an air of paradox in all this, however, for how can a teacher get a student to acquire a trait which is presupposed by the successful

completion of the tasks which the teacher assigns? Does a
student achieve critical-mindedness **because** he or she is forced
to consider problems, or is it the case that one cannot even
consider something as a problem unless one is **already**
critical-minded? How can one learn through problems to be the
sort of person which it is necessary to be in order to see
something as a problem (rather than as an exercise)?

This sort of paradox occurs when the capacity to be
acquired is an open one, but is absent when we are dealing with
closed capacities. What accounts for this difference? Closed
capacities are, by definition, abilities which are identical with
the sorts of rules and routines to be followed by anyone
performing a given activity; if, for example, someone is able to
count, since this is a closed capacity, we can predict in terms
of a specific rule what that person will be doing when
manifesting his ability. In seeking to develop this capacity in
someone, all that matters to a teacher is to get someone to
perform in accordance with certain rules and routines. But with
open capacities the relationship between a person's actions and
his or her ability is not one of identity, since to have an open
capacity is by definition to leave room for actions which are
not predictable.

Consider for a moment the relationship between actions
which are honest and the character trait of honesty. In seeking
to develop this trait a teacher might give students moral
"exercises" by capitalizing on recurring situations which call for
honesty. Thus some lost money or an overdue book may serve
as occasions which call for displays of action which are
typically honest. In this way a child can perhaps acquire the
routines of honesty. But in learning the routines of honesty the
child has not thereby become honest, since there are moral
situations of a non-routine sort in which what constitutes an
honest action is not clear to the child - in short he or she has
a moral problem. Being honest, then, is not only not reducible
to a set of routine actions which themselves are honest, but is
also presupposed in the statement of a moral problem
concerning honesty: that is, only honest people have problems
about what sort of action in a given situation would be the
honest one.

Suppose we now return to critical-mindedness. If this trait
is an open capacity, then successful completion of those tasks
which are problems rather than exercises must be done from
this capacity rather than simply in accordance with certain rules
and routines. If what I have said here is correct, then
Passmore's principle does not describe a principle for the
teaching of critical-mindedness, but rather is describing a test
for determining whether a student has that trait.

There is yet another difficulty for Passmore's principle.

Even if we allow that Passmore has articulated a principle for the teaching, or development, of critical-mindedness, to be critical-minded involves more than the having of certain capacities. For being critical-minded is, as Passmore acknowledges, a trait of character, and its possession requires that a person not only have certain abilities but also a willingness to exercise these capacities in the appropriate circumstances. Passmore's principle then can only be significant for the developing of capacities, but not of a willingness to use them. Whether or not such a willingness can be taught seems at this point to be as problematic as the teachability of open capacities, for such willingness is as "open" in the ways it may be manifested as the most open of human capacities.

Perhaps then the teachable is after all limited to whatever is subject to rules and routines.

Patrick O'Leary
University of Western Ontario

Patrick O'Leary has written for various journals in his field of interest, which includes such topics as indoctrination and the ethics of belief, and the concepts of moral character and of literacy. He recently co-edited, with several others, a text entitled **Philosophy of Education: an Introduction.** He is at the University of Western Ontario, in the department of educational policy studies.