

James T. Sanders
University of Western Ontario

Why Teaching Cannot (and Need Not) Be Improved

Abstract

It is generally conceded that research on teaching has not significantly improved teaching practice. There have been two common explanations for this problem and its persistence: (a) an inadequate body of empirical research and/or (b) the reluctance of teachers to adopt the recommendations of this research. This article argues, however, that the theory/practice gap is a pseudo-problem which derives from a basic misconception about teaching that is endemic to effectiveness research, namely, that teaching is a complex skill which is susceptible to substantial improvement. It is further argued that teaching, in the limited behavioural sense, is more likely to represent a common capacity that neither can nor need be improved.

The failure of teacher effectiveness research

This article assumes the following general claim to be uncontentious: that the research on teaching has yet to identify the components of effective teaching, and thus has so far failed to lead to any significant improvements in the practice or technology of teaching. By "uncontentious", I do not mean to imply that none dispute this general appraisal. Certainly, some people (most obviously, those engaged in teacher effectiveness research) take a more sanguine view about the progress and promise of this research. For example, B.O. Smith (1983) has recently asserted, quite to the contrary, that "it cannot be

reasonably denied that research has made a significant contribution to the practice of pedagogy" (p.489). Indeed, he goes so far as to announce that "we are now able to specify the requirements for an effective classroom" (p.490).

But such unqualified optimism is rare -- even among those most committed to research on teaching. By and large, the general assessments or periodic, state-of-the-art reviews of this research have been far more modest and, often, even despairing about the achievements of this research (Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Pease, 1983; Doyle, 1978; Dunkin & Biddle, 1974; Fenstermacher, 1978; Forman & Chapman, 1979; Heath & Nielson, 1974).

The generally acknowledged failure of research on teaching to improve significantly the practice of teaching, however, has usually been mitigated by appeals to two extenuating circumstances: (a) an as yet inadequate body of cumulative, empirical research on effective teaching or (b) an inability or reluctance on the part of teachers to use the results of this research. The first alibi pleads a lack of wisdom; the second, a lack of will. These two, general explanations for the failure of teaching research to improve significantly practice, ironically, also explain its continued "success". That is, the first explanation, by faulting the shortcomings of the research, succeeds by creating the obviously self-serving "need for further research." The other explanation succeeds by simply denying the failure. Instead, it blames the victim or victims, that is, the teachers who either cannot or choose not to heed the findings of this research which promises to improve their lot.

However singularly persuasive these two explanations may be, surely both can't be correct? Is it that we don't have the research to use or that we don't use the research that we have? Like the contradictory dynamics of economic "stagflation", one explanation claims the root cause is "underproduction"; the other, "underconsumption".

Although these twin, conventional explanations for the problem's persistence are at odds with one another, they nevertheless agree that there is this problem, namely, that knowledge about teaching has been unable (for whatever reason) to inform or improve the practice of teaching. Contrary to this basic consensus, however, I claim that there is no problem to be solved. I will argue that the theory/practice gap is a pseudo-problem whose persistence derives from a basic misconception about teaching that is endemic to the effectiveness research. Specifically, this research has wrongly assumed that teaching represents a complex skill that is susceptible to substantial improvement with training. I contend, on the other hand, that it is more plausible to view teaching, as defined by this research, as a common capacity. Moreover, the happy, if

paradoxical, moral of the story is that teaching cannot and, indeed, need not be improved.

The complexification of teaching as process

I want to be clear at the outset that by "teaching", I am referring to a rather special, and therefore limited, conception. It is a conception that emphasizes the form, as opposed to the substance, of classroom teaching. In linguistic terms, it is a conception more concerned with the syntax than with the semantics of teaching. Despite this self-inflicted limitation, it remains, nevertheless, the most influential behavioural conception of teaching within the effectiveness research, namely, the so-called "process-product" or "process-outcome" paradigm. (Again, note the emphasis upon "process" as distinct from "content".) "Teaching" in this empirical research tradition is represented as the causal linkage between specific teacher characteristics or teaching behaviours (process) and student learning or achievement (product or outcome). The general goal of this research has been to discover those **relatively** content-free, as well as context-free, teacher behaviours that are associated with (read: "cause") superior student achievement. This is how this research empirically defines "effective teaching".

More importantly, there are two, other fundamental presuppositions built into this binary model of teaching that have gone unchallenged. One is that these generic, classroom-based teacher behaviours (that is, the "process" half of the paradigm) are, in fact, skills or competencies or abilities. The other closely-linked assumption is that these teaching skills or abilities are extraordinarily complex. For example, Brophy and Evertson (1976), whose research is "paradigmatic" in every sense, maintain that:

Effective teaching requires the ability to implement a very large number of diagnostic, instructional, managerial, and therapeutic skills, tailoring behavior in specific contexts and situations to the specific needs of the moment. Effective teachers not only must be able to do a large number of things; they also must be able to recognize which of the many things they know how to do applies at a given moment and be able to follow through by performing the behavior effectively. (p.139)

The kinds of "process" variables which this research has considered as constitutive of teaching skills or abilities are too numerous and varied to list. They range all the way from such discrete, countable bits of teacher behaviour as frequency of questions, wait-time, etc., to such vague, abstract "behavioural" characteristics as warmth, clarity, indirectness, etc. The latter

are sometimes referred to euphemistically as "high-inference variables" -- meaning that the identification of such constructs requires a sizeable inferential leap up from the classroom behavioural data.

Rare ability or common capacity?

Categorizing and calling such teaching behaviours as these "skills", "competencies", or "abilities", however, implies that they show wide and stable individual differences or variation ranging from skillful to inept, competent to incompetent, or high to low. Indeed, any ability construct, as part of its core meaning, implies that its human distribution is necessarily both unequal and invidious. Therefore, what is at issue is whether or not it is correct to assume that the kinds of teacher behaviours examined within the "process-product" paradigm constitute skills or abilities in the usual sense. Is it even plausible to assume that these classroom behaviours are analogous to such skills as musical talent, mathematical aptitude, intelligence or general ability, or any of the other abilities for which wide and stable individual differences are expected? I think not. As Johnston (1975) points out:

Most of the acts performed by teachers in the classroom could probably be performed by any intelligent adult and by some children, if they knew what should be done. Teachers probably vary little in their abilities to execute performances called for in a detailed instructional plan. The improvement that is possible in the actual performance is limited primarily to the achievement of somewhat greater poise and efficiency of action. (p.50)

Similarly, and counter to the claim that "teaching requires the ability to implement a very large number of skills," J.M. Stephens (1967) also contends that "the basic mechanisms responsible for teaching reside in some very earthy, primitive tendencies. Although more pronounced in some people than in others, these tendencies are quite prevalent" (p.137). As part of an admittedly speculative theory of schooling, Stephens asserts that for the most part teaching reduces to a few "spontaneous communicative tendencies." Specifically, he maintains that all of us are nearly equally possessed of spontaneous tendencies:

1. To talk of what we know.
2. To applaud or commend some performances and correct others.
3. To supply an answer which eludes someone else.
4. To point the moral. (p.58)

Furthermore, Stephens suggests that such nativist tendencies do not require much conscious improvement or refinement.

These forces, let loose within the existing school, would, in and of themselves, induce a substantial measure of educational attainment even in the absence of rational, deliberate decisions - in the absence, indeed, of any intent to teach (p.58).

To transpose the old saw: It is not just that teachers are born, but rather that we are all born teachers. However, leaving aside for the moment the nature/nurture issue, the immediate point here is that classroom "skills" (to stick with the misnomer) can be seen as more akin to widely distributed human capacities for which there is little need and, perhaps, little room for improvement.

There are then these two conflicting conceptions of teaching and teaching effectiveness. One holds that teaching competence or effectiveness expresses an uncommon ability; the other, a rather commonplace capacity.

The extraordinary use of the ordinary

There is a slightly different view of effective teaching that tries to reconcile these opposing views by conjoining them -- by, in effect, having it both ways. It characterizes good teaching as both a mundane capacity and a rare ability. The sense of this two-way conception of teaching is captured in David Cohen's felicitous phrase, "an ambiguity of competence" (quoted in Sykes, 1983, p.90). The phrase is meant to make the point that although the component knowledge and skills of teaching are, in and of themselves, broadly available to everyone, their deployment and orchestration in effective teaching defines a rare ability. As Sykes (1983) puts it, "...competence in teaching depends to a much greater extent on the extraordinary use of ordinary knowledge" (p.90).

The demand for extraordinary ability, by this account, derives from certain inherent contextual features of teaching-in-action which include "large measures of uncertainty, instability and uniqueness" (Sykes, 1983, p.90). This extraordinary ability is presumably defined by significant individual differences in the ability to deal effectively with these intrinsically problematic features of "real-time" practice -- but using, however, only common knowledge and ordinary skills.

These conditions of practice (that is, uncertainty, instability and uniqueness) which call for the "extraordinary use of ordinary knowledge" thus underwrite teaching's claim to be a complex skill or ability. But at the same time, these conditions of practice seemingly undercut the likelihood that social scientific research

on teaching can ever improve this complex ability. Again, as Gary Sykes (1983) puts it, "...a serious disjunction exists between the knowledge about instruction generated through social science research and the nature of teaching practice" (p.90). It seems that the fickle conditions of practice make the problem of relating knowledge and practice in teaching fundamentally incorrigible. The disjunction exists (and persists) because of a profound mismatch between (a) the epistemological requirements of research for predictability, replicability, generalization, and the like and (b) the kaleidoscopic, existential conditions of practice. These dynamic, everchanging conditions imply that "the act of teaching may just not be hospitable to an analytic approach..." (Sykes, 1983, p.91). Teaching, as transcendent "ordinary-knowledge-in-use", just won't stand still long enough to be analysed.

But how plausible is this characterization of the practical context of the teacher's work? Does teaching truly consist of "large measures of uncertainty, instability, and uniqueness"? Because as against this perplexingly random version of classroom events, there is an equally, if not more, compelling stereotype which emphasizes the humdrum repetitiveness or (less pejoratively) the comfortable predictability of classroom routine. And surely whatever uncertainty is inherent in the interactions of teachers and students is considerably offset by the mutual or shared expectations which define these social roles and which regularize classroom behaviour. In short, for classrooms, as for Holiday Inns, the reassuring norm is that "the best surprise is no surprise at all."

It seems to me then that the assumption that effective teaching represents a significant, even extraordinary, skill or ability depends upon "seeing", either (a) teaching, itself, or (b) the work setting where it takes place as far more complex, problematic and difficult than either, in fact, is. It is as if only by either (a) dramatizing the sheer number of component instructional "skills" or "competencies" or (b) evoking the buzzing, blooming confusion of "life in classrooms" that the claim that teaching is a complex ability can be made plausible. This "complexification" of teaching, of course, serves to legitimate it as a skill worthy of social scientific interest and research. The research, in turn, keeps alive the hope that a thorough understanding of teaching will in time lead to significant improvements in performance, that theory will eventually improve practice.

Walking, talking, and teaching

The empirical research on teaching, however, in its commitment to the "process-product" paradigm has limited its inquiry to the behavioural or manifest performative attributes of

classroom teaching. In so doing, it has collapsed the study of teaching to the study of the classroom "delivery system", that is, the everyday, communicative behaviours that teachers exhibit in the classroom. And "teaching", in this highly restricted sense, does indeed seem well within the capabilities of, as Johnston (1975) suggests, "any intelligent adult and ... some children" (p.50). These sorts of garden-variety classroom behaviours are thus more indicative of a well-developed human capacity than of a widely varying individual skill or ability. Such a reconceptualization of teaching as a well-developed capacity also alters the prevailing expectation that it can be significantly improved through social science research. As Schrag (1981) suggests:

In spheres where our practical accomplishments are already considerable (e.g., cooking, talking and, if I am right, teaching) it may be unreasonable to expect that any strongly corroborated theories would lead to practical measures or strategies substantially at variance with those we either already employ or which have at least been tried out. (p.272)

For example, talking, for all practical, communicative purposes, occurs at a sufficiently high order of performance that we neither need nor expect theory and research in linguistics to provide any important improvements. Moreover, talking is not, I submit, **just** an example of Schrag's category of considerable practical accomplishments; talking is not here merely illustrative. Rather talking, itself, is nearly synonymous with teaching in much of the empirical classroom research. For Ned Flanders (1970), in fact, classroom teaching can be exhaustively dichotomized into either "Teacher Talk" or "Student Talk". In short, the common classroom is plainly one of those "spheres" (as Schrag calls them) where the considerable, practical, human accomplishment of talking is most evident.

Apart from its considerable overlap, even synonymy, with just talking there are additional reasons why "teaching", in the narrow, performance-based sense, is likely to be a well-developed human capacity. For one, the "spontaneous communicative tendencies" (to use Stephens' phrase) that make up teaching no doubt have considerable survival value. As Schrag (1981) points out, human beings, as a species, confront a number of biogenetic limitations:

Human instinctual equipment is underdeveloped... Human survival depends on living in groups. Humans are not capable of reproducing for at least a dozen years... and the human gestation period is almost a year. The survival of the species depends, therefore, on our ability to communicate with each other, to cooperate and coordinate our actions, and to care for and initiate children into the human community. (p.273)

In short, our survival as a species is tied to our capacity to teach one another. "Good teaching" (as Stephens' theory also suggests) is part of our hard-won biological nature; it confers selective advantage.

Moreover, our pedagogical nature enjoys considerable nurture throughout our childhood and adolescence. Nearly all of us who become classroom teachers will have served a very long "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975, p.61). Lortie reckons that "those who teach have normally had sixteen continuous years of contact with teachers and professors" or, more precisely, he estimates that "...the average student has spent 13,000 hours in direct contact with classroom teachers by the time he graduates from high school" (p.61). In speculating on the implications of this long apprenticeship, Lortie (1975) suggests that:

It may be that the widespread idea that "anyone can teach" (a notion built into society's historical reluctance to invest heavily in pedagogical research and instruction) originates in this; what child cannot, after all, do a reasonably accurate portrayal of a classroom teacher's actions? (p.62)

I hasten to add that Lortie subsequently makes it plain that he, for one, rejects the idea that "anyone can teach". But his rejection is based upon a much richer notion of teaching, both as an enterprise and an occupation, than the one constrained within the "process-product" paradigm. Moreover the empirical, "process-product" research bent on improving teaching **does** more or less define "teaching" as "a classroom teacher's actions." And for "teaching", in this limited behavioural sense, we have all been well-prepared by both nature and nurture to give "a reasonably accurate portrayal." Such a common capacity needs no improvement.

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