

There are Skills and There are Skills

Allen T. Pearson

The University of Western Ontario

In his essay, "Is Teaching a Skill?" David Carr defends the thesis that teaching is not reducible to a set of skills, although skills may be utilized in teaching. An implication of this thesis that Carr discusses as well is that teacher preparation programs that see themselves as providing a set of skills are misconceived. The argument proceeds through three steps, which I shall summarize very briefly. After giving a standard view of teaching as an intentional activity in which someone tries to get someone to learn something, the express focus of the discussion is on "the nature of teaching as a means to the achievement of education." The second step is to look at positions that see skill as a science or as an art. Seeing teaching as a set of instrumental skills in the manner of an applied science or technology is deemed to be implausible since no matter how technically systematic teaching may be there are cases that are more inspired or imaginative than others. Through this we are led to the view of teaching as a set of artistic skills. This analogy breaks down because of the moral dimension of teaching. As Carr says, "teachers have not the freedom of genuine artists to do as they like and their professional conduct is subject to constraints of moral, social, and political accountability." The final step in the argument is to consider whether teaching is a skill that can be practiced more or less morally, that is, whether the moral dimension of teaching is separable from the skill of teaching. Using the work of Alasdair MacIntyre in particular, Carr argues that the fact that there are rival conceptions of moral education there can be no morally neutral pedagogy. That is, the skills of teaching cannot be separated from the moral dimension. On this basis, he concludes that teaching is not reducible to a set of skills and, further, that programs of teacher preparation that cast teaching as a set of competencies will be inappropriate. This summary captures the steps in the argument, but certainly misses the nuance and detail.

I am in sympathy with Carr's position. It would seem that he has the right conclusions, but I am not sure that his argument is completely successful. I want to consider three issues that are raised in the essay. In doing so, I will raise questions about the argument, although I do not feel that my points will show the position to be misconceived. Instead, they will act as efforts in clarification.

The first point I wish to raise stems from Carr's decision to focus his attention on teaching, which is aimed at the achievement of education. My question is whether this decision determines the conclusion. The basic reason that teaching is not a skill for Carr stems from the moral dimension of teaching. A plausible case can be made that it is education that introduces the moral dimension here and not teaching itself. It has often been argued that education is a moral or value concept. To describe a person as educated is to say that the person has met some standard of worth. It is a morally worthwhile state to be in. To the extent that this is true, the moral dimension is introduced by the decision to focus on teaching aimed at educating, and not on the concept of teaching itself. To test the argument that teaching is not a skill we would

need to look at cases of teaching that are not aimed at educating. Such cases might obtain when teaching is aimed at the trivial, such as teaching children how to tie their shoes, or at the morally repugnant, such as teaching children how to cheat effectively on examinations. Whether it is the case that these examples of teaching can be reduced to a set of skills is an open question. Carr's argument depends upon showing there is a moral dimension to the teaching. In the first case, there may well be a moral dimension to the teaching that would stem from our moral responsibility to treat children, even in the event of their learning to tie their shoes, with respect and care. The same may, ironically, hold in the other case. It may be that respect for persons comes into play when we are teaching people how to cheat effectively. The moral dimension, then, in these cases seems to stem from our basic moral commitments to others, not from the fact that we are teaching. To examine these issues in detail would take me too far afield; let it suffice to say that it is a possibility that the decision to focus on one sort of teaching has forced the conclusion that is applied generally.

My second point concerns Carr's use of the concept of skill. Given the centrality of this concept to the paper, the fact that he does not spend time helping us to understand what he means by skill is curious. The closest he comes is in his discussion of conceiving teaching as an applied science where he says, "a skill is a systematic – possibly routinized – mode of instrumentality apt for the exploitation of causal regularities in the interests of various human productive purposes." This is reminiscent of what Passmore, in *The Philosophy of Teaching* (a work cited by Carr with approbation), calls a "closed capacity."¹ But this is not all there is to skill. Passmore also describes another kind of skill or capacity, the open capacity, that is in no sense systematic or possibly routinized. Here is another example from a less philosophically astute source, a manual for swimming coaches.

The concept of "skill" (the term "skill") is used in a wide variety of ways in educational activities. The goals of education are often said to include life-skills as well as job-skills; the goals are often said to be skills-based. The ease with which people use the term may lead one to overlook the vast complexity lurking in the standard and ordinary uses.

Here is a specimen of the usage.

The *analysis* of skills is itself a skill — and one you must master if you want to help participants develop their skills to the fullest. In general, the analysis of skills is a process, and it refers to a certain understanding of physical skills and the application of this understanding to participants' performance.

The overall process of analyzing skills has three distinct steps:

- finding out how participants actually perform physical skills
- determining how participants could perform these skills
- using this knowledge to detect and correct errors in performance and so help participants improve their skills.²

This is not an unusual or idiosyncratic way of talking. It makes perfect sense. But to think of skills in this way makes implausible the claim that teaching is not a skill. In this common use of the concept, a skill is not a systematic way of achieving a purpose separate from the moral domain. Rather, skills can be imbued with moral direction and purpose. To talk of life-skills, for example, is to be involved in the moral shaping of the life of oneself or of another person. The moral debates that, for Carr, prevent teaching from being a skill are an intrinsic part of discussions of life-skills.

There are, then, uses of the concept of skill for which Carr's argument does not work. This is, of course, not to say that in the particular sense Carr has in mind that his argument fails. What it does show is the necessity for being clear about what is meant by a skill. This concept would appear to be one that is used in such a wide variety of ways that almost any point can be made using the concept in one or another of its senses. While Carr may be correct in arguing that people cannot be prepared to be teachers through the provision of competencies independent of virtues and the moral domain, greater clarity is needed on the nature of those competencies that are being criticized.

My final point relates to Carr's discussion that uses the basic conclusion of the paper to provide insight into the preparation of teachers. His closing comment summarizes nicely his position, "if we can but clear our heads of current professional obsession with pedagogic skills, we may come to recognize that the really deep professional challenges of education and teaching are implicated in a web of complex intellectual, moral, and normative questions which must certainly exhaust any training in mere *techné*." It is, perhaps, interesting that while we would likely agree that there is a great deal of discussion of pedagogic skills, Carr provides no references for us where this obsession is evident. Indeed, it may be possible to find such references. I do wonder, though, just to what extent anyone really believes that teaching can be a routinized set of technical skills that are morally neutral and would apply whatever or conception of education might be. My experience is different. While people do talk of preparing teachers to use skills it is never in isolation from the larger purposes of educating children. The study of the social context of schooling, and even philosophy of education, remain parts of teacher education. Those courses where one might expect to find a set of competencies being taught soon venture into the areas of morality, values, and philosophy. Those teaching methods courses never stray far from the moral purposes of education. Any accounting of what a teacher should know contains a variety of standards pointing to knowledge, skills, and attitudes, not just to skills. People may appeal to standards of value implicitly, but they are there nonetheless. Carr is absolutely right in arguing that the preparation of teachers cannot be reduced to technical, routine skills. My concern is that it is hard to imagine anyone saying that teacher preparation should be conceived in this way. I would go further and agree with Carr that the morally important parts of teaching are probably best learned in the field and not in the academy. This, however, does not make the academy irrelevant to the preparation of teachers. Much can be done in the classroom away from the field to enable teacher candidates to deal with the moral demands of teaching and to think critically about the moral issues that arise in such environments. We may live in a time when the obsession with technical skills affects many parts of our lives and our institutions of higher education. But there are also many indications that these obsessions are being questioned in the academy, not only in education but also in fields as disparate as medicine, agriculture, and business. We do need to keep the moral dimensions of teaching at the forefront. But this should not be a reason for ending every scientific approach to the technical questions of education. Now, I may be reporting a different set of perceptions. Given, however, the broad range of uses that the concept of skill

can have, our differing perceptions of teacher education may derive from differing perceptions of skill.

1. John Passmore, *The Philosophy of Teaching* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 40.

2. *Coaching Theory Level I: National Coaching Certification Program* (Gloucester, Ontario: The Coaching Association of Canada, 1988), chap. 5. My thanks to Fred Ellett for providing this source.