

Those Who Can't: Fantasy, Reality, and the Teacher's Art

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I introduce this article with an anecdote. In a university course that I teach twice a year, I always structure one lesson around the ubiquitous phrase, “Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.” I begin by asking students to raise their hands if they have heard the statement before. Inevitably, most of my students have heard it. Because these students have been exposed to a lifetime of teachers, and since some plan to be teachers in the near future, my classroom is always full of strong opinions about this saying. Some like it, having been unimpressed by many a teacher. Many strongly disagree with it since it threatens the identity of any sensitive teacher-to-be.

In the past, I have taken the opportunity to break through the superficial connotations of this statement in order to set it in a wider social context. When I ask about the meaning of this phrase, students usually tell me that it means teaching is wrongly stereotyped as being less difficult and less important than other occupations. I tell them I agree that the phrase is used in this way, but I go on to suggest that perhaps the social context of the teaching profession has provided fodder for the idea that teachers are not the ones who can. I propose, first of all, that teaching has historically been a woman's profession. Thus, in an ongoing milieu of hegemonic sexism, it is easy to use the denunciation of teaching as a proxy for denouncing woman's work. And even when teaching is not primarily done by women, vestiges of this logic remain when those who teach, be they male or female, are discredited because of their proximity to children. As another example of this condemnation by proxy, I sometimes ask my students, “Whose job is more highly valued? The dentist of children, or the dentist of adults.” The general impression is that those who work with adults are more valued.

A few semesters ago, my students pointed out another aspect of this

“teachers can’t” refrain. They reminded me that a twisted capitalist rationale is also at work. Because teaching does not entail high salaries, capitalist afterthought provides convenient proof that teachers do not do quality work. They also reminded me that teachers do not create a product of any value. Thus teachers cannot claim to add the surplus value so cherished in a capitalist society. My way of stating this is that teaching happens in what might be called the “black hole of capitalism.” We work, but we make no widgets. In a sense, the teaching profession is quite dangerous to capitalism because it inaugurates a space that defies capitalist logic. So another way to understand the phrase “teachers can’t” is to interpret it as an admonition to those who refuse to create surplus value. It is not unlike a comment I recall being made by a TV news reporter covering “The Battle in Seattle” protests some years ago. Turning to her co-anchor, the TV reporter observed, “I don’t even think these people know what they are protesting.” The message was this: How could anybody know what they are doing when they are not adding to capital?

After great discussions about this phrase in my Social Issues course, I have nevertheless remained disappointed with a lingering sense that, yes, my students and I have come up with good, socially progressive reasons for accusing the utterers of this phrase of sexism and mindless capitalism. We have talked about why those who utter the phrase out of malice shouldn’t utter it, and why the job of teaching is not less important than other jobs. However, while I have subjected the phrase to ideological critique, I have never used a more hermeneutic approach to examine the lingering truths that such an utterance necessarily conveys simply by continuing to exist *qua* utterance. I have never entertained the possibility that the phrase may have something *positive* to teach us. Only recently have I come to understand that there is in fact a generative philosophical conversation to be had regarding statements about those who can’t. The phrase has links to a historic, philosophical conversation at least as old as Plato.

In the remainder of this article, I use the philosophical disagreement between Plato and Aristotle on the benefits of art, as well as the psychoanalysis of D.W. Winnicott, to show that the putative lack-of-ability on the part of teach-

ers is rich with theoretical and psychic import. I will show that this supposed lack is directly linked to the *artistic* role of the teacher. It is actually important to remember that the work of the teacher *is*, in many ways, once-removed from productive "real life." However, being once-removed is not necessarily an attribute that should be condemned. Being once-removed is both integral and necessary because the teacher has artistic work to carry out. This necessity of being once-removed has, I will argue, been overlooked even by such thoughtful educators as John Dewey and Paulo Freire. The phrase "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach" is more than a resentful refrain, and more than a sign of our sexist, neoliberal times. It is, in addition, a profoundly philosophical reminder that teachers are artists. As artists, we create a work of art. Our work of art is the pedagogical experience. This work defies the categories of real-life versus life that is something less than real. As I will argue, our work of art neither can nor can't. It won't succumb to such a binary.

THOSE WHO CAN'T ARE ARTISTS: PLATO AND ARISTOTLE'S ARGUMENT

It is commonplace for philosophers to acknowledge Plato as consummate anti-artist while acknowledging Aristotle as champion of mimesis and the *ars poetica*. And along with this schism about the benefits of art run parallel presumptions about what it means to imitate versus what it means to do something for oneself. For Plato, imitating is not equal to doing something for oneself. Imitating, for Plato, is a derivative activity whose results end up duping the spectator, putting him or her out of touch with the real world of what people actually do. Plato's Socrates puts the matter as follows:

... the imitator, I said, is a long way off the truth, and can do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part an image. For example: A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artist, though he knows nothing of their arts; and, if he is a good artist, he may deceive children or simple persons, when he shows

them his picture of a carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter.¹

Plato's condemnation of the imitator-artist is paralleled by his suspicion of the spectator. For Plato, the artist uses imitation to turn people into mere spectators. But these spectators are worse than ordinary watchers because they are watching something once-removed from actual life. In this oft-cited passage, Socrates explains:

... and the spectator fancies that there can be no disgrace to himself in praising and pitying any one who comes telling him what a good man he is, and making a fuss about his troubles; he thinks that the pleasure is a gain, and why should he be supercilious and lose this and the poem too? Few persons ever reflect, as I should imagine, that from the evil of other men something of evil is communicated to themselves. And so the feeling of sorrow which has gathered strength at the sight of misfortunes of others is with difficulty repressed in our own.²

For Aristotle, on the other hand, imitation provides—at least in the best of aesthetic circumstances—space for reflection and catharsis, both of which can lead to human flourishing. Aristotle's *Poetics*, an extended users' guide for imitative poetry, is most famous for its account of catharsis, whose effects are described by Hans-Georg Gadamer in the following way:

What is experienced in such an excess of tragic suffering is something truly common. The spectator recognizes himself and his finiteness in the face of the power of fate. What happens to the great ones of the earth has exemplary significance ... To see that "this is how it is" is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he, like everyone else, lives.³

While this imitative divide between Plato and Aristotle is a ripe theme for commentary among scholars in philosophy, literary theory, and the classics, it

should also be noted that the same debate is repeated in much recent educational thought. Both progressive education, as typified in the work of John Dewey, and critical education, *a la* Paulo Freire, share a strong, Platonic bias against imitation and spectatorship.⁴

DEWEY AND FREIRE ON IMITATION AND SPECTATORSHIP

John Dewey's *My Pedagogic Creed* reads not unlike an extended Platonic critique of educational imitation, a critique of those who can't, and therefore don't. "I believe," writes Dewey:

that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living ... I believe that education which does not occur through forms of life, or that are worth living for their own sake, is always a poor substitute for the genuine reality and tend to cramp and to deaden.⁵

Dewey thus articulates his stance with regard to imitation in the classroom. He is a staunch advocate of genuine reality in much the same way that Plato is critical of those who do nothing but imitate.

Dewey's disdain for the onlooker, as opposed to the doer, is further clarified in *Democracy and Education* where he assails spectatorship in traditional education:

In schools, those under instruction are too customarily looked upon as acquiring knowledge as theoretical spectators, minds which appropriate knowledge by direct energy of intellect. The very word pupil has almost come to mean one who is engaged not in having fruitful experiences but in absorbing knowledge directly.⁶

For Dewey, when one is a spectator, one does not experience genuine life. Thus progressive education, in contrast to traditional education, must foster circumstances where students are more than *mere* spectators.

Critical education, too, demonstrates disdain for education that fosters

spectatorship instead of participation in genuine reality. As Freire notes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

The banking concept (with its tendency to dichotomize everything) distinguishes two stages in the action of the educator. During the first, he cognizes a cognizable object while he prepares his lessons in his study or his laboratory; during the second, he expounds to his students about that object. The students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher.⁷

The banking system thus treats the student as a spectator in an event that is prepared for in advance by the teacher. First the teacher prepares his or her lesson. Then, the teacher delivers the lesson while the student watches.

Indeed, both progressive and critical education have a distinct bias against educational imitation. Faced with the statement “those who can’t,” Dewey and Freire definitely want to change both students and teachers into those who *can*. Dewey and Freire want the classroom to be authentic living, without spectatorship or artifice. This is the Platonic realism that progressive and critical education have bequeathed to modern educational thought.

TEACHERS ARE ARTISTS WHO CAN’T: AGAINST DEWEY AND FREIRE

It seems to me that both progressivists and criticalists might do well to revisit the Aristotelian side of Plato-Aristotle debate. As noted above, Dewey’s *My Pedagogic Creed* consists of a firm refutation of educational imitation. “Education,” Dewey’s famous statement reminds us, “... is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.”⁸ Dewey’s logic is as follows: At present, the school is structured as a weigh station on the road of life. The school serves something other than meaningful life. To remedy this, Dewey says that educational experience must become real experience. Education must occur “through forms of life ... that are worth living for their own sake.” Of course, the obvious difficulty with Dewey’s logic is this: if education becomes

the same in form as other forms of life, then how will one be able to identify education *per se*? When education is no longer a preparation for living, then it will be living itself. That is to say education will not be different from other forms of living. The paradox of Dewey's position is that authentic education actually ceases to be education.

I suggest that Dewey's method of escaping the pitfalls of imitative education is hamstrung by the same unsatisfying logic that Plato uses to condemn artists. Plato's argument is this: artists are imitators and they do not know how to do things out in the real world. Artists are not able to pass on actual know-how, and their art should be banned as a result. Artists must become doers rather than imitators. At this point Plato's logic becomes unsatisfying precisely because one is left saying, "But wait, Plato. You have just assumed that the only benefit of art could be its practical use-value in the real world. What if there are attributes of art that do not reside on the use-value continuum?" What if Aristotle is onto something when he extols the virtues of art's artifice?

Dewey's "form of living" logic is likewise unsatisfying. When Dewey argues that education should be a form of living like all others, one is left saying, "But wait. You have just assumed that the continuum of educational experience ranges from preparation-for-living to actual living. What if there are attributes of education that do not reside on this continuum from preparation to actual?" What if education, like art, has qualities that defy the normative assumption that actual living is preferable to every other sort? What if the "can't" of those who can't has a different quality than the 'can' of those who can. What if the teacher's can't is not necessarily a deficit?

Returning to Freire, one must be equally dissatisfied. Freire's argument goes like this: current education is structured so that students do not experience the praxis that is so central to human existence. Teachers, because they are part of oppressive regimes, rob students of their "ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human."⁹ Following Freire, banking teachers act, but banked students do not act. Students who are banked "live in a duality where *to be is to be like*, and *to be like is to be like the oppressor*."¹⁰ "What characterizes the oppressed is their subordination to the consciousness of the master,"¹¹ and this

subordination is augmented by the practice of banking authority, a practice that is quite happy to let students experience the world vicariously, as an inauthentic part of student consciousness. To rectify this situation, Freire recommends that students become authentic doers rather than inauthentic onlookers.

Like Dewey, I understand Freire to partake in the same unsatisfying realism that characterizes Plato's anti-aesthetics. For Freire, banking experience is an imitation of real experience and thus must be replaced by actual experience. Freire recommends that both teachers and students enter real-life together in dialogue:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.¹²

Freire's unfortunate Platonism is similar to Dewey's, differing only in its Marxist emphasis on the alienating ideology of classroom imitation. While for Dewey the problem with imitation is that students are wasting time *preparing* for real life, for Freire, the problem is that students are being dehumanized and inauthentic as they imitate the action of the banking instructor. For Freire as for Dewey, though, one is left asking: is the question solely one of inauthenticity versus authenticity? Is it only a question of being less-than-human and unreal, *or*, fully human and real? Is there not an aesthetic space that is both unreal and also fully human?

D.W. WINNICOTT'S CONTRIBUTION: THE TEACHER'S ART

In response to the Platonism of progressive and critical pedagogies, I turn finally to the psychoanalysis of D.W. Winnicott. I argue here that by using a psychoanalytic perspective one can give the "can't" of those who can't a more extended consideration. While it may seem like a long way from a pop-

ular catch-phrase like “those who can’t,” to Plato, to Dewey and Freire, and now to psychoanalysis, I believe the move is justified because it offers a way to tighten the loose threads woven above between teachers who perhaps “can’t,” and the work of the artist. Winnicott offers an understanding of the creative space established *by* the teacher, *for* the student. Drawing on Winnicott, one can understand this creative space as different in quality from other life forms, yet certainly not derivative to other life forms.

Winnicott’s account of creativity is as follows. All human beings are creative to a greater or lesser extent. Non-artists as well as artists engage in creativity, and the main difference between non-artists and artists is the extent to which their creativity gets manifested. Artists create a product to be observed and appreciated, while non-artists practice creativity in ways that are not necessarily observable by others. But whether one is an artist or non-artist, in both cases creativity has to do with the use of objects. Life consists of a sequence of encounters with objects, objects that exist in reality as well as psychic objects representing reality. Psychic objects have been introjected, having a life relegated to fantasy. For Winnicott, the fact that all people translate real objects into objects of fantasy is proof that all people are creative. Objects of fantasy are, by definition, the *creation* of individuals.

Following Winnicott, the artist’s work is exemplary of the creative tension that arises between reality and fantasy. When an artist produces a work of art, the work can never be a product of pure fantasy. The artist is creative, yes. But the artist’s creativity always makes use of objects that exist prior to the creation of the artwork. So art is created, but it is not created *ex-nihilo*. The place of art, like the space of all creativity, “... is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world.”¹³ The artist is always called to work on the fault-line between real objects and objects of fantasy. Whatever is created is also partly there before its creation. For the non-artist as well as the artist, creative life consists in a constant negotiation between, on one hand, objects and experiences that are created and under our own control, and, on the other, objects and experiences that are given to us and thus not under our full control.

Winnicott calls this place of creativity, this vacillating space between fantasy and reality, “transitional space.”¹⁴ He argues that all cultural practices, from childhood make-believe, to reading, to speaking, to playing games, to making works of art—and I would add to teaching even though Winnicott does not refer specifically to education—all of these practices happen in transitional spaces. Winnicott writes:

This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant’s experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work.¹⁵

As a specialist in pediatric psychoanalysis, Winnicott was interested in how successful parents establish healthy transitional spaces for children. He argues that the work of a caregiver entails establishing a space where the child is allowed to play and explore without having to ask the question: “Is this fantasy, or is this reality? Am I the creator of my experience, or is my experience out of my control?” The parent, or in Winnicott’s terms, the “good enough” parent, creates the circumstances for the child to flourish on the healthy fault-line between fantasy and reality.

I propose that the teacher, whether teaching adults or children, likewise creates the circumstances where students are enabled to flourish within such a healthy, fault-line tension. As a teacher, whether I teach quantum physics, Shakespeare, or philosophy of education, my role is to establish a space where objects of study are neither completely fantasy, nor are they completely real. A successful pedagogical creation cannot be under the exclusive control of the student, nor can such a creation be completely of the “real” world and thus beyond the role of the student *qua* student. My role, like the “good enough” parent’s role, is to establish a liminal space where students do not ask the question, “Is this experience under my control or is this not under my control?” Nor do they ask, “Is this real or is this not real?” Indeed, the extent to which these questions are *not* necessary is the extent to which the pedagogical experience

has succeeded as a work of art.

Forestalling the above questions about fantasy versus reality is precisely what makes the teacher not just a creator, but an artist. The teacher, as artist, creates a product. The teacher's product is not commonly called a work of art, but I would argue that they are one and the same. The teacher's work of art is the pedagogical experience. It is the "transitional space" established for the student. This work of art, like all works of art, demands something very specific. It demands that those who partake in the experience accept a certain "suspension of disbelief," to borrow Samuel Taylor Coleridge's term. Or, following Immanuel Kant, one might say that the teacher creates an object of aesthetic beauty when he or she creates a pedagogical experience. Indeed, in Kant's efforts to schematize the beautiful, he found himself on the same terrain that I am attempting to describe with regard to the teacher's "can't." The pedagogical experience, the teacher's "can't," may be well-described by Kant's famous phrase, "purposiveness without purpose."

This sort of pedagogical experience, one created by an artist, offers a very different perspective on the phrase, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." Yes, teachers are those who can't. But teachers are not those who can't in the sense that they are failures. They are those who can't in the sense that what we produce defies the simple binary of can versus can't. The experience I¹ is the artist's "can't." And the artist's "can't," has, at least since Aristotle, been understood and widely appreciated as an experience that has merit.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have gone out on a limb and argued that progressive and critical educators have for too long chased the right question into the wrong corner. The right question is: what is the place of real life in education? Both progressive and critical perspectives have held that education should be more about doing things in the real world, that it should be about living life. What both perspectives miss is an answer to this question that does not get stuck in the binary of doing or not doing. These perspectives miss the same thing that

Plato missed when he did not understand the work of the artist. And this is where I want to honor the can't of those who can't.

Yes, it is true that teachers can't. But it is also true that artists can't. Thus we teachers share something with artists. Just because we can't, it is not the case that we have nothing of value to produce. We do not produce widgets, but we do produce a work of great import. What we produce, or at least what we should produce, are educational scenarios that enable students to have an aesthetic experience. We should create circumstances that are "transitional," to borrow Winnicott's phrase. We should re-claim the uniqueness of education from those who would say that education should just give way to reality. We should stand against Plato and affirm that our creations are artificial, yes, but they are not derivative. When I plan a lesson, my lesson should be a work of art. That is to say, it will be an experience to be interpreted by students. As such, it will not be completely under my control. And it will certainly not be completely quantifiable in terms of what is now called "assessment."

To conclude, I invoke the first stanza from Wallace Stevens's poem, *The Man with the Blue Guitar*. The subject of Stevens's poem is Pablo Picasso's painting, *The Old Guitarist*. This painting, in turn, has as its subject another artist, a guitar player. Stevens's poem is thus an artistic expression, of an artistic expression, of *another* artistic expression. The poem begins like this:

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must,
 A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

 A tune upon the blue guitar
 Of things exactly as they are."¹⁶

The poem tells, in refrain after refrain, the ponderous song of one who cannot play "things as they are" yet must use those very "things as they are" to produce something that is "changed upon the blue guitar." In this essay, I have tried to describe the role of the teacher as one who plays such a blue guitar. As Stevens points out in his poem, some listeners—and I would add many who comment on the role of education—will argue that things being played upon a blue guitar must stay "things as they are." Yet Stevens also intimates that, within the artistic realm, be it music or poetry—or be it as I have argued here the pedagogical experience—there remains a lingering sense that such a tune remains "beyond us, yet ourselves." As further confirmation that those who say teachers "can't" are unwittingly onto something, I suggest that Steven's phrase "beyond us, yet ourselves" answers the right question—what is the place of real life in education?—in the right way.

1 Plato, *The Republic* (2008), Book 10. Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm>

2 Ibid.

3 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1975), 128.

4 Charles Bingham, "Against Education Humanism: Rethinking Spectatorship in Dewey and Freire," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 35, no. 2 (2016): 181–193.

5 John Dewey, *My Pedagogical Creed* (1897). Retrieved from <http://infed.org/mobi/john-dewey-my-pedagogical-creed/>.

6 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (2008), Chapter 11. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/852/852-h/852-h.htm>.

7 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 61.

8 Dewey, *My Pedagogical Creed*.

9 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 48.

10 Ibid., 30.

11 Ibid., 31.

12 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 61.

13 D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1971), 51.

14 Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*.

15 Ibid., 14.

16 Wallace Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 165.