

Teaching in Relation

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Barbara Stengel's examination of Mrs. M's classroom practice reminds us that response-ability is vital to teaching because learning takes place in a relationship. The essay is an elegant example of simple observation, coupled with mindful attention, revealing a great deal about the nature of education and the process of schooling. Stengel does not come to us an instructional specialist, prescribing the best way to prepare and deliver a lesson. She does not add to the "knowledge base" of teaching. Rather she presents us with a philosophical study of the reality of everyday classroom life. There is nothing dramatic that happens in the report we are given, nothing unusual. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that everything that happens is life as usual, and for that reason dramatic. The focus on a brief moment of instruction presents a complex and significant set of questions and issues too often obscured by familiarity.

Stengel raises a series of questions that surround a routine classroom encounter. What are the moral issues? What is happening? What are the standards by which we should judge teaching? What are the requirements of a good teacher? What does it mean to be open to the moment, to the student? A question she does not raise but is suggested by the existence of this essay is, what does it mean that we need to be reminded that education is an interpersonal relationship? How could we think that it is anything else? And if the task is to make teachers more response-able, more able to enter into that relationship honestly, then the question is, what stops us? In this response I will consider two categories of relevant phenomena: institutional characteristics and personal ones.

The educational *zeitgeist* is profoundly in conflict with the ideals of authentic engagement between teachers and students. For not entirely bad reasons, education has come to be functional, tied to economic development rather than human thriving. Schooling has become a means to employment, and that has distorted its meaning. The job of the school, on this view, is not to educate citizens and help create fulfilled human beings; it is to prepare efficient workers. This changes the focus from the importance of the interpersonal relationship between the teacher and the student to the efficiency of the system and the technical proficiency of the teacher.

Routinization of the curriculum and testing follow. The point is to control the curriculum so that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed in the labor market are taught to students with a minimum of expense, and that those who will be high-skill, high-status workers receive the skills (and are given the expectations) appropriate to their future status in life (and vice-versa, of course). From this follows the regime of high-stakes testing, curriculum control, and classroom management, to name but a few of the features we take for granted in education today that make the teacher less response-able.

Another key insight of Stengel's is that teaching is an intellectual-moral enterprise, and that these two aspects are intimately related. Morality is too often

seen as religious, which makes it improper for the public sphere of a secular society. Given that religion is properly relegated to the private world, the reasoning goes, and given that morality is a by-product of religious belief, then it should not be part of public schooling. However, morality, broadly conceived, is concerned with the ability to live a rich, fully human life, including exercising restraint and discipline when this is required to achieve our goals. The Greeks understood, as did Dewey, and Stengel reminds us, that living morally is living well, with or without religious assumptions. And education, as a moral and intellectual enterprise, is properly centered on living well, not merely on making a living.

A note. We need to be careful talking about teaching and learning and education. Not all teaching is educational, nor is all learning. This is the point Dewey made so clearly in *Experience and Education*,¹ pointing out that children learned a great deal in traditional schools, and teachers taught a great deal in traditional schools, but far too little was educational — connected to further growth. Education can take place anywhere at anytime. Democratic life is educational precisely because it demands engagement with others. This entails the same sort of response-ability that teaching does. Thus teaching in response and engagement is imperative if the teaching is to be educational, especially if it is to be preparation for democratic citizenship.

These obstacles are not necessarily the result of bad intentions. If good jobs and a comfortable life are to be had as a result of a certain kind of schooling, and that clearly is the case, then it makes sense to try to make that sort of schooling available to all, or at least to as many as possible. It is a democratic impulse, if not an egalitarian one, that sees schools as engines of social mobility. Despite the persistence of discrimination, schools are in fact the means for many to move from lower classes to higher ones, from less comfortable lives to more comfortable ones.

And yet, if schooling is the instrument of job-skill dissemination, there is no institution whose only goal is education. And if the narrow and specific skills and knowledge that are most easily evaluated with the use of standardized testing become all there is to the school curriculum, schooling will have little to do with education. The mission of economic equality, as partially realized as it is and as important as it is, can seriously distort the process of education and distance teachers from students.

Finally, I want to briefly point to the obstacles to response-ability created by computer technology and the internet. Even if the immediate problems of access are solved, it seems unrealistic to think that this technology will improve education, though it will surely make information storage, retrieval, and transmission more efficient. The common mistake here is to think that the latter and the former are identical, or even closely connected.

The use of computers in teacher preparation and their inclusion in our programs must also be mindful of this. Virtual reality is not helpful in helping children learn how to live in “real” reality. We must remind our students that their students might learn while on the computer, but that does not mean they are being educated.

This problem is particularly acute in elementary education, where personal support and contact is most essential. But even in baccalaureate programs we must

help our students understand that education is not the impersonal and private acquisition of knowledge and information, but the social and communal pursuit of wisdom. Wisdom is more complex, and the complexity is because teaching is a moral-intellectual enterprise. In teacher preparation programs, the central task is not to teach how to teach; it is to teach *how to be a teacher*. The key is helping prospective teachers understand that they must be response-able, and that they must in turn help their students become so. That is precisely the sort of thing that is not “taught” in a lesson plan, but in a shared reality. If we want teachers to teach as Stengel encourages, we need to attend to the personal characteristics of the teachers we send into classrooms. Institutional constraints need to be removed or reduced. However, the personal characteristics of the teachers also become important, and we must attend carefully to these in the evaluation of prospective teachers.

Finally, I want to pick a small quibble with one of the implications of Stengel’s discussion of Mrs. M. as a teacher of mathematics. Commenting on Mrs. M’s lack of math training, Stengel suggests it is one thing to evaluate her according to the “standards for math instruction” and quite another to do so according to “visions of adolescent development.” If she means that these are two equally important kinds of knowledge and that teachers of math ought to be evaluated by their knowledge of both math and their students, then I heartily agree. But the implication appears to be that, even though Mrs. M. is not a content expert, we might judge her to be a good math teacher based on her knowledge of adolescents. Mrs. M. has, over the years, made it her professional responsibility to improve her math knowledge, and this is much to her credit. Her deficiencies in this regard, if any, do not appear to affect her instruction in the excerpt presented. But could she have been competent to teach math when she did not know math, however well she knew adolescents? In subject-matter instruction, the proper response will often require deep disciplinary knowledge, and no teacher can be judged a success who does not know her subject.

That quibble aside, this is an interesting essay that raises important questions and reminds us of important truths.

1. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938; reprint, New York: Collier Books, 1963).