Chapter 1

Teaching as a Moral Dilemma

A book that attracted more publicity for its contract than for its content is To Renew America by Newt Gingrich. Although the book did not sell well, it contains some remarkable contrasts revelatory of contemporary controversies. One of the book’s revealing contrasts is between “education” and “learning.” “Education,” according to the author, “describes a system of teachers and students that has grown inefficient and expensive,” while “learning” “describes a dynamic community of people using whatever means they have to improve their performances and better their lives.”

That contrast leads immediately to five others, including “the learner versus the student,” and “learner focused versus teacher focused.” According to Gingrich’s model, “in the Industrial Age the education model has been a passive student dominated by an active teacher.” But in the “Third Wave model...responsibility is placed on the learner rather than the teacher.”

Gingrich is enthusiastic about the learner while he disparages the teacher. That contrast is especially strange when one considers that To Renew America is largely adapted from Professor Gingrich’s televised academic lectures. A tension between teaching and learning has existed throughout the history of Western culture. But a total contrast of the terms “teach” and “learn” is especially to be found in the 1960s, a decade Gingrich is fond of attacking.

At the end of the 1960s, one of the most popular speakers in the country was Ivan Illich. After analyzing many modern institutions, Illich hit upon the school as the linchpin of oppression. His prescription for liberation was contained in the small tract, De-Schooling Society, published in 1970. There probably would have been an audience for such a book in every decade of U.S. history, but the end of the 1960s — with its relentless rebellion on college campuses — was primed for Illich’s message.
The message Illich stated most succinctly was "to teach is to corrupt." During the short time in which he was hailed as prophet and liberator, large audiences of schoolteachers listened to his attacks on teaching, and then dutifully filed back into their classrooms and continued to teach. Those who agreed with his thesis presumably felt more guilty than before for morally subverting the young.

Illich soon progressed to criticizing other institutions; the schools continued through cycles of public apathy and passionate proposals for reform. That Illich had identified a political and cultural system worth criticizing can hardly be denied, but his failure to make any relevant distinctions regarding "teach," "teaching," "teacher," and "schoolteacher" undermined the possibility of his saying anything helpful about education in general and about the meaning of "to teach" in particular. Illich's typical opposition was between teaching and learning; more teaching meant less learning, hence the passionate attack upon teaching.4

In some education books the opposition is not between teaching and learning, but there is nonetheless a moral problem with being a teacher. Jacques Barzun's *Teacher in America* is ostensibly in praise of teaching. But the moral dilemma is created at the beginning of the book in this description:

To be sure there is an age-old prejudice against teaching. Teachers must share with doctors the world's most celebrated sneers, and with them also the world's unbounded hero-worship. Always and everywhere, "He is a schoolteacher" has meant "He is an underpaid pitiable drudge." Even a politician stands higher, because power in the streets seems less of a mockery than power in the classroom. But when we speak of Socrates, Jesus, Buddha and "other great teachers of humanity," the atmosphere somehow changes and the politician's power begins to look shrunk and mean. August examples show that no limit can be set to the power of a teacher, but this is equally true in the other direction: no career can so nearly approach zero in its effect.5

In this passage the plight of a person called "teacher" might have been the springboard for a helpful analysis of the meaning of "to teach." But the author has already narrowed his focus to the career problems of the schoolteacher; these issues are what occupies the rest of Barzun's book. That track is the standard one to follow, but it leaves unresolved the "age-old prejudice against teaching."

The claim that "he is a schoolteacher" has always and everywhere meant "he is an underpaid pitiable drudge" seems to be an overgeneralization. In most times and places, "schoolteacher" has sparked ambiguous thoughts of dedication, idealism, limited possibilities, and an underappreciated public worker. If always and everywhere "schoolteacher" has meant that he (or very often she) is an underpaid pitiable drudge, what hope could be offered to change the situation? Presumably, Professor Barzun is not including college teachers in this characterization; in fact, most books giving advice to schoolteachers are written by university professors from above the fray.

There is in the passage a positive portrait of "the teacher." The great teachers of humanity are set on a pedestal that no schoolteacher can hope to approach. The contrast between those people who have power without limit and those people who have a career that approaches zero places the great teachers on one side and schoolteachers on the other; Jesus, Socrates, and Buddha are not the ones with a career problem. Great teaching is exemplified by three men who tried to teach the human race how to be good. Would it not be better for all of us if we were to follow Socrates, Jesus, and Buddha? Alas! We seldom do follow their advice. And, indeed, *Teacher in America* does not have much to say of their teaching beyond this brief rhetorical flourish.

Socrates, Buddha, and Jesus are indeed interesting figures in the history of teaching, though they certainly do not teach the same lesson. Each rebelled in his own way against the established teachings of his time. To each of the three we easily attach the term "teacher," but the relation that each of them had to the term was and is problematic.

In the case of Gautama, the Buddha, one of his titles is "the silent one." The experience that transformed him seemed at first to be beyond communication to others. He was therefore skeptical of trying to teach disciples his newfound truth. He did come to influence others by his example and his enigmatic stories. Eventually there grew up a religion that is called Buddhism, and books summarize this religion under headings such as "The Four Noble Truths" and "The Eightfold Path." The word "teachings" is used to refer to Buddhism just as it is used of the religion he was rebelling against. The Buddha comes to be called a teacher.

Somewhat similarly, Jesus of Nazareth began as a reformer of Jewish teachings. Like Gautama, his own teaching or counter-teaching is a combination of example and enigmatic statements. As befits the
Semitic thread of religious history, there is more verbal jousting in Jesus' teaching and longer debates about individual teachings. Jesus seems to be comfortable in having disciples who address him as "teacher." After his death, his sayings and stories were gathered in a book that Christians hold to be as sacred as the teachings that nourished Jesus' life.

In Jaroslav Pelikan's study of the images of Jesus, the author places "Jesus the teacher" first. Pelikan says that "teacher" was the "least controversial title" attributed to Jesus in the first century. However, by the second century, the title was embarrassing and by the third century obscure. What had happened was that a radical split between Judaism and Christianity left the title of teacher (rabbi) in Judaism. Although "Jesus the teacher" is regularly brought back in Christian reform movements, Christianity has not especially exalted the title of teacher. In Judaism, Islam, and most religions, nothing greater can be said of a religious leader than "teacher." The fact that "teacher" was applied to Jesus in the first century suggests that he was not as much of a rebel as later Christianity portrayed him. The fact that the title is almost lost in later Christianity undercuts the historical relation of Christianity and Judaism.

In considering religious leaders such as Moses and Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad, one can see the close relation between religion and teaching. In some languages, the terms almost blend together. Two dangers to this close identification are evident. First, the act of "to teach" is nearly rendered invisible by the prominence of the religion's teachings. When that happens, a lot of things that were not necessarily taught by Moses or Muhammad get associated with the teaching. The great teachings acquire cultural accretions that later generations may find foreign and unacceptable.

That situation leads to the second danger, a wholesale rejection of teaching by the individual critic or a critical-minded era. If the teachings of a prophet are rejected because of preference for teachings from another source, society may suffer no loss. But if the identification of the people's religion and teaching is complete, an era might react against the idea and term "teaching." Here is where the moral dilemma of teaching in modern times emerged. The choice was seen to be between subservience to the teachers of the established religion and — in Immanuel Kant's description of enlightenment — daring to be wise and having the courage to use your own reason.2

Teaching as a Moral Dilemma

Socrates: The Ambiguity of Teaching

Before going ahead with the modern plight of the activity of teaching, I take note of the third great teacher that Barzun listed: Socrates. His relation to teaching is perhaps the most interesting of the three people named. To this day, Socrates is held out as the great precursor of modern man, the founder of our modern educational ideal. But he remains a complex and mysterious character. We piece together his thinking from the early dialogues of Plato (the later dialogues probably represent a more fictionalized Socrates) and a few other references in Xenophon and Aristophanes.

What is evident in almost every reference to teaching in the Socratic dialogues is the moral issue at stake. I do not mean only that the question of teaching is often posed in the context of asking, Can anyone teach virtue? Rather, the claim to possess knowledge and to be able to impart such knowledge to other people is understood to be a claim to moral superiority. If the claim cannot be sustained, then the "teachers" are not technical failures but moral frauds.

The argument between Socrates and the Sophists is told to us in a one-sided way with Socrates as the hero. Some twentieth-century scholars raise the question of whether Socrates' opponents might not have something to teach us about teaching. For example, the Sophist Protagoras speaks eloquently of the whole community teaching people through the laws it has and of punishment as intelligible only as a form of teaching. Socrates may be a great teacher but might it be that his form of teaching presupposes a form of teaching that is communal and nonverbal?8

On a textual level, the case could be made that Socrates rejects teaching and teachers. For example, in the Apology, Socrates says, "I counted Eunus fortunate indeed if he really does possess that art and teaches for such a modest fee. For my own part, at any rate, I would be puffed up with vanity and pride if I had such knowledge. But fellow Athenians, I just don't have it."9

Such statements need to be read in the context of the irony that abounds in Socrates' speech. One could say that Socrates founded our modern meaning of irony: saying one thing while giving a signal that the opposite is true. In this instance, the first sentence is laced with irony: the huge fee that Eunus charges for his teaching would be a modest fee — if he really could teach what he claimed to teach. But he
is no teacher. For true teaching one has to look to someone (Socrates) who is directly contrasted with Evenus: one who sponsors a free inquiry that produces a "service to the god."

The moral dilemma that Socrates was wrestling with and could not resolve by a straightforward answer was, Who anoints anyone as "teacher" and gives that person the right to teach? Who gave that person or persons the right to have their word assumed as true and beyond challenge? Socrates and the Sophists come down to us in history as irreconcilable opposites. And yet Aristophanes could picture them doing the same thing, and from his view it was not a very good thing. Both were engaged in what other people call "teaching." But whose knowledge and what authority supports the teaching? Socrates regularly denied that he possessed knowledge, but he attacked one knowledge on the basis of another. Clearly, he thought he had discovered the most important kind of knowing. He called it a "human wisdom" in contrast to the claim of a "wisdom that is more than human."[11]

This formula does not resolve the question of who or what legitimates Socrates' vocation. There is an unmistakable religious element in Socrates, a "demon" that moved him to do what he did.[12] This power remains somewhat mysterious, as perhaps it had to, but the appeal to some force greater than human reason is what keeps the Socratic search for the good from turning into an egocentric instrumentalism. That is, Socrates' criticism of the Sophists was that they reduced knowledge to an instrument of human good. Socrates was not in the vocation of selling knowledge of the good life.[13]

Anything that claimed to be divinely guaranteed knowledge was subjected to Socrates' critical questioning. The knowledge we think we have may not be knowledge at all, while the knowledge that is most important may be in some sense present to us beyond our immediate awareness. If that is the case, then the one who is "teacher" will be forced to use strange methods, always trying to turn the question back on a deeper question.

The issue of whether Socrates "teaches" is well summed up by Gregory Vlastos:

In the conventional sense, where to "teach" is simply to transfer knowledge from the teacher's to the learner's mind, Socrates means what he says: that sort of teaching he does not do. But in the sense which he would give to "teaching" — engaging would-be

learners in elenctic argument to make them aware of their own ignorance and enable them to discover for themselves the truth the teacher has held back — in that sense of "teaching" Socrates would want to say he is a teacher, the only true teacher.[14]

Vlastos's use of quotation marks in the above passage is to indicate that the question is, "What is the meaning of the term 'to teach'?" In our day, as in Socrates' time, there is perhaps a "conventional" sense of teaching (to transfer knowledge). Given any sustained reflection on the matter, it quickly becomes apparent that such a transfer is impossible. Probably in every decade of every century someone "discovers" that there is no such thing as teaching. He or she announces to the world a new finding: No one can teach anyone anything.[15]

The verb "to teach," however, does not disappear. In fact, the word is everywhere. If no one can teach anyone anything, why is it that everyone has the sense that at least on some occasions they were taught? Over the years, I have asked thousands of people to engage in an exercise concerning teaching. I ask them to write out in detail a description of when someone taught them something; that is all the instruction I provide for the exercise. I have never had a person who could not come up with a description. Most people see about the task immediately and usually come up with a precisely detailed description.

The search in this book is for meaning in use. How does the "croud" use the word? Regarding "teaching," the crowd obviously has mixed feelings. The activity seems to be all but universal and yet it also seems to be impossible to realize. Giving up on the word, if that were possible, would not resolve our problems. But we still have to test out possible directions for use of the term so as to clarify what the moral dilemma is and how best to work with it.

The Modern Dilemma

Socrates may still exemplify the essential dilemma of teaching, but I think the actual embodied problem has become worse in recent centuries. The early founders of modernity would probably be astounded at our plight. The scientific revolution, it was assumed, would solve the problem of teaching. Surely teaching was a minor problem compared to the problems of astronomy and physics. One of the earliest of these
scientists of the new education, Johann Comenius, wrote, "As soon as we have succeeded in finding the proper method, it will be no harder to teach schoolboys in any number desired, than with the help of the printing press to cover a thousand sheets daily with the neatest writing." Thus arose one of the favorite metaphors for teaching in modern times: writing on a slate or, better still, printing on paper.

This kind of passage, dear to humanistic critics of education, can be unfair to Comenius. He is commenting here on teaching large groups instead of small groups, not on what teaching is. For the most part, his writing on teaching is not posed in mechanical terms. In fact, the term that dominates almost every page of his educational writings is "natural." Comenius and others after him believed that teaching will be easy once the laws of nature have been discovered; education is simply a following of nature. As the plant when supplied with water and sunlight grows of itself, so the child needs only the nurturing of its environment and it too will grow to maturity. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's statement at the beginning of Emile — "Plants are shaped by cultivation, and men by education" — is the most common source for this image, but it is an image found in numerous other educational treatises.

It is ironic that Rousseau is the one who is assumed to represent this position, because Rousseau opposed "man and nature." In his educational writing, Rousseau's sympathies seem to lie on the side of "nature." But the contemporary reader can misread this choice to mean that the nonhuman world (nature) provides the path for man to follow. Rousseau was writing at one of the moments in Western history when "nature" was in transition. Rousseau's meaning of "nature" is actually close to what later centuries have meant by "man." That is, the great conflict is not between the human race and the nonhuman world; rather, it is between "man" (meaning society) and "nature" (meaning the individual).

For Rousseau's educational purposes, "nature" is the boy's inherent structure of growth. For teaching "according to nature," Rousseau set out a very rational program for the tutor to follow. It seems to work well at the early stages and Rousseau's work was a great inspiration to bettering the education of young children. Rousseau, like his British counterpart John Locke, did not have children in his care. Whatever the source of the wisdom they tapped into, they helped to improve the care of children according to "nature's" wisest ways.

What they could not do was cure the split between the individual and society. At the beginning of Emile, Rousseau says it is impossible to educate both a man and a citizen; he opts for trying to produce an individual man according to nature; that means one who would forever be in conflict with society. The tutor doggedly follows a plan that allows his young student to discover knowledge — so long as it is knowledge that is innocent of society's economic, political, sexual, and religious forces. Eventually the tutor must fall back as society's sex, religion, and politics come to bear. The desperate hope is that Emile's individuality will then be strong enough to withstand the assault of these social forces when teaching has come to an end.

Religion, for example, is a key element in the whole plot. Rousseau would have his young student shielded from religion until the age of 15. Then everything about religion would be put into a straightforward, persuasive explanation. About fifty pages of Emile consist of a long, boring sermon on what Rousseau takes to be Christianity, but is in fact a summary of the eighteenth-century's newly minted religion, Deism. In other times and other places one might be able to root knowledge of religion more closely in "nature." But even "nature religions" go beyond nature; that is, humans ask questions and search for meaning in a way that sets them adrift from other beings "in nature" or other natures.

It is at that juncture — when the child begins to reason and to socialize — that teaching becomes a moral crisis. The child, it would seem, has to know certain things to function in even the most primitive society. Those things begin to be conveyed before the child has a reflective consciousness. Some revolutionary reformers suggest that children should discover everything by and for themselves. It is doubtful that the program has ever been seriously entertained because its execution is unimaginable. Each culture and each generation have very particular things for the children to learn.

Rousseau was realistic on this point, despite what may seem to be a curriculum guided only by the child's interests. The tutor knows what is best; it is he alone who knows where the process is leading. The system is authoritarian, although as all authoritarians know, the trick is to hide the coercive power in what appears to be complete liberty. When a conflict does arise, Rousseau's advice to the tutor is brutally realistic: "Let him know only that he is weak and you are strong; that from your respective situation he necessarily lies at your mercy.... Let the bridle which constrains him be compulsion and not authority." As in John Locke's educational writing, there is sweet reasonableness on the
part of the teacher, because, if necessary, the child can be intimidated ("shamed") by sheer power.22

Locke and Rousseau did not resolve the moral dilemma of teaching and, in some ways, they worsened it. Both focus on what they take to be the ideal teaching situation: one male tutor confronting one young, male student. In this context, teaching gets confused with the power that adults have over children. The male tutor knows that some day the boy will be grown up and able to reject the teaching. While the boy is young, he can and must be taught; when he gets to be an adult he is free of this oppression. Educational reformers who wish to liberate children usually find no other recourse than to attack teaching.

Donald Schön identifies the problem of educational reform as having two parts: how we name what we attend to and how we frame its context.23 The premise of Emile, that one male tutor confronts one young, male student, is unduly limited in its "framing" in many ways. One of the assumptions in this framing is that the ideal situation has one pupil.

When school reformers try to bring Rousseau into the classroom, they are frustrated by having twelve, twenty-two, or fifty-two students in front of them. How can one follow "nature" (the individual child's bent) when one is dealing with a large group? The schoolteacher is led to feel that Rousseau-like theories do not work only because the schoolteacher's situation is deficient. But is it possible that the original framing is deficient?

One of Kurt Lewin's famous studies that helped to found our knowledge of group process was a study of a hospital. The staff of the hospital instructed each new mother on how to take care of the newborn infant. The hospital staff gave twenty minutes to each mother; eventually, however, the staff found that instructing six mothers for almost the same length of time was more effective; and obviously it was more time-efficient for the hospital. The fact that most people most of the time learn better in groups than individually is now commonplace knowledge.24 But the picture of Rousseau's tutor and pupil still haunts the subconscious of educational reformers. If only each pupil had his or her own teacher, then would not educational reform work? The answer, I suspect, is no; in fact, we would have a more obvious problem with the meaning of "to teach."

Another problem with Rousseau's framing of teaching is that the teacher is male and so is the student; or at least the main part of Emile is about the education of the boy; the girl Sophie appears only in the last of the five books. To his credit, Rousseau was aware of an important question here: the possible differences between boys and girls in education. The same awareness cannot be attributed to most of the reformers in his wake.25

Emile is educated to become an "autonomous man." Sophie's education is to prepare her to be the mother of Emile's children and the manager of his home. While Emile is supposedly independent, he is in fact dependent on his partner for all of life's earthly necessities. In public, the man is powerful, in private the woman is; but this relation of public man and private woman does not produce two whole human beings. In a novel written after Emile, Rousseau acknowledged that the project would fail. In that novel, Sophie rebels against her role, becoming sexually promiscuous; Emile goes through various hardships and ends up a loner.26 The lack of an integral relation between Emile and Sophie reveals that Emile's education is at least as deficient as Sophie's.

It is interesting to note that Sophie is more easily taught than Emile and will never have to rebel against teaching. Women were thought to be closer to "nature." Mothers were to teach their daughters sewing, cleaning, cooking, caring for infants. The powers that are exercised pertain to nurturing bodily functions. In religion, Sophie does not have to be shielded as Emile is, nor is she ever given the deistic system to digest. Religion is the comfortable set of attitudes and practices that the mother will maintain and pass on to her daughter.

Rousseau's program for the education of girls finds few takers today. But what is the alternative? One route is to demand that Sophie be given the same education as Emile so that she, too, can become an autonomous individual. Writing thirty years after Rousseau's Emile, Mary Wollstonecraft sounded this theme in her Vindication of the Rights of Woman. The term that dominates her book is "reason," and the contention is that women can be every bit as reasonable as men. "Children cannot be taught too early to submit to reason... for to submit to reason is to submit to the nature of things."27

Mary Wollstonecraft gives short shrift to all the "womanly" things that occupy Sophie's upbringing. If forced to choose between these two models, most educational writers today would presumably go with Wollstonecraft. But is it certain that she has framed the context with sufficient breadth? Jane Martin points out that much of what Sophie is taught are necessities of human life. They are not things that can be or should be transcended in the name of reason.28
Sophie might be a good reminder of where all human teaching starts. Although teaching should go beyond where Sophie goes, human teaching can never entirely leave behind being born, fed, clothed, nurtured, visited, and the like. Jane Martin, in examining books in the philosophy of education, found that these necessities of life are excluded from teaching. What mothers do is not counted as deficient teaching; it is not counted as teaching at all. Teaching, it is still assumed, consists of a man giving reasons to a boy. And, if some girls are allowed into the room, that fact does not of itself change what it means "to teach."

What the eighteenth century has given us is a meaning of "teaching" in which an adult exercises power over a child. It is assumed (not without reason) that children need to be controlled. In addition to the parents, a special group is allowed to exercise this power; they are the "teachers." In other circumstances, the teacher's power would be immoral. When the child has the power to direct his or her own life, then the power of the teacher will be overthrown. Philip Jackson, in The Practice of Teaching, says there are two things that liberals and conservatives in education agree on: remove unnecessary pain in learning and increase the independence of the learner. Commenting on the second, Jackson writes, "Nor would anyone in his or her right mind recommend keeping students dutifully servile to their teachers a day longer than is necessary." The shocking thing explicitly said to be agreed upon by all spokespersons is that students should be "dutifully servile at all.

Suppose that children decide that being servile for even one day is a state no one should have to put up with. That may be the situation we are now experiencing. In the eighteenth century, it was possible and acceptable to intimidate the child, to "shame" the child into submission. The power of shame played a key role. As late as 1930, Willard Waller, a humane sociologist of education, describes how to control a child by the sheer power of shaming. Schoolteachers might still be able to do that, but most find Waller's description repellent; they are, so to speak, ashamed of the idea. Even though adults who are not ready to subscribe to a children's bill of rights recognize that children should be respected and treated with human dignity. This development has not made life easier for schoolteachers; in fact, it is central to the crisis that has gripped schools for several decades. The children have discovered that the school cannot or will not exercise the power to make them servile. At that point, "to teach" becomes unclear if adults cannot tell children what to think.

If this analysis is correct — that teaching has been equated with an ethically questionable exercise of power by adults over children — then there would be two places in modern educational literature where teaching is attacked or avoided. That turns out to be the case with "moral education" and "adult education."

In the twentieth century, the phrase "moral education" came to mean a specialized area — not the opposite of "immoral education" but of "neutral education." While most of education was left to its assumed neutrality, a special set of techniques was developed for moral education through moral development. The literature on "moral education" is suspicious of "teaching." At the most extreme (for example, "values clarification") teaching comes under direct attack. The teacher should never say that something is right or wrong.

In most of "moral education," the attack on teaching is more subtle. What is affirmed is "moral development," a process that simply makes teaching moot. Jean Piaget's work on moral judgment (later extended by Lawrence Kohlberg) has been influential in setting the direction of "moral education."

Piaget was critical of adult interference in the development of the child's moral judgment. He was most critical of schoolteachers because their attempts to teach morality are detrimental. Piaget was reacting to a book by Emile Durkheim entitled Moral Education. Durkheim thought that the school was a "locus, par excellence of moral development." Piaget rejected that idea. Durkheim, writes Piaget, was still relying on the "authority" that comes from society, and society's priests, the schoolmasters. In Piaget's framework, to teach morality to a child is almost a contradiction in terms. Beyond "facilitating" discussions among children, the task of the parent and the schoolteacher is to get out of the way.

In twentieth-century "adult education," it is even more obvious that teaching does not fit. If to teach is to exercise power over a child, then (to try) to teach an adult is an insult. Adult-education literature tried to invent a new vocabulary (the centerpiece was "andragogy") which was to gain its clarity by a contrast to the teaching of children. Children study a subject, adults solve problems; children's learning is directed by others, adults are self-directed learners. Most important, children need teachers, adults need anything but teachers.

There was no agreement on the name of the people directing adult education, so long as it was not the oppressive "teacher." The index of Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education does not contain an entry
for “teaching.” An international conference on adult education stated, “In adult education practice it was now widely accepted that the concepts of ‘student’ and ‘teacher’ were inadequate. Instead of ‘teacher,’ the word ‘guide’ or ‘counselor’ or ‘animateur’ were increasingly being used.”

As it turns out, however, it is not that easy to get rid of teachers and teaching in education. For example, in the book reporting the above objection to “teacher,” the author twenty pages later bewails the failure of “teacher-training programs” to study adults and their learning abilities. But this exclusion of adults would seem to be consistent with the author’s advocacy: teacher training would study children; animateur training would study adults.

In actual practice, the thousands of adult-education programs do not seem to get free of what most people call teaching and teachers; the words have not disappeared. There is a lot of group discussion, although these days “group work” can be found in almost any school. The total contrast between the education of children and the education of adults is — fortunately — not borne out in practice.

I say it is fortunate because the method of totally contrasting children and adults put what is supposedly all the good and liberating activity (for example, self-directed learning) on the adult’s side. The child was to be left to the oppression of external forces. There was no inclination here to reform children’s education; that would only cause a blurring again as to the specific nature of “adult education.”

I would applaud the fact that the adult-education movement recognized a problem with the meaning of “to teach.” There is an urgent need to examine the power relations between child and adult. One can acquiesce in a reduced and ethically questionable use of teaching by separating adult education from teaching. Or, by starting our thinking with adults, we could get a much richer picture of all teaching. Teaching is the way to major social, economic, and political transformation. This is where the great hopes of the founders of the adult-education movement in the nineteenth century remain unfulfilled.

Consider the provocative thesis of Peter Elbow: “When the sexuality of teaching is more generally felt and admitted, we may finally draw the obvious moral: it is a practice that should only be performed upon the persons of consenting adults.” I doubt that Elbow really wishes to exclude children from teaching; he does wish to wrench our thinking away from typical assumptions in both educational writing and “adult education.” If we begin by thinking of teaching in its most complete form as something that happens between adults, we would have a rich relation to explore. Among other things we would get a better picture of where children fit in the relation of teach-learn. We would be more sensitive to the child’s gradual entrance into the exchanges of adult power.

Children are, so to speak, an exception in teaching. They are an important exception; the very youngest children, I will argue in the next chapter, are a test of all theories of teaching. If we were to proceed on this path, the existence of “adult education” would be cast in doubt. We would not need a theory of adult education; instead, more than ever, we would need a theory of education that excludes neither children nor grownups.

Liberating the Verb “To Teach”

In this final section, I will document the claim that schoolteaching is only one form of teaching but, even as writers admit other forms, teaching is cast as obvious in the one case and discernible only by shadowy extension in the other cases. Educational literature usually assumes the image of an adult standing in front of a group of children. The image was set in the eighteenth century before the advent of universal schooling. Neither John Locke nor Jean-Jacques Rousseau was describing classroom instruction. But the modern school was able to embrace the image of the individual (male) tutor and (boy) child pupil. Even when women generally replaced men (at the “lower levels” of teaching) and the pupils multiplied in numbers, the idea of what a teacher is and does did not substantially change.

Philip Jackson, in The Practice of Teaching, says of teachers, “Among the first things to note is how many kinds of teachers there are. Leaving aside the large number of non-professional teachers (most parents, for example), we are still left with an impressive variety of types, the major ones well known.” With one parenthetical sweep, most teachers are dismissed from the topic of teaching.

More important, when Jackson brings up the meaning of “to teach,” he introduces a reference to home, street, synagogue, church, and doctor’s office, with the premise, “although formal schooling is obviously the chief source.” For many writers on education, “formal schooling”
is apparently the chief source, but it is not at all obvious that that is how most human beings have experienced and understood the primary meaning of “to teach.” Writers on education need to consider the possibility that they are looking at teaching through the wrong end of a telescope. What teaching means in the setting of “formal schooling” cannot be enriched if all the other instances of teaching are assumed to be lesser imitations of what schoolteachers do.

Consider the astounding assumption by Brenda Cohen in this fairly typical paragraph in the philosophy of education: “Teaching can, of course, take place outside schools, but it is arguable that the term is then used by analogy with what does go on in these special institutions.” There is the liberal granting that “of course, teaching takes place outside schools” but it is “arguable” that any usage outside schools is only by analogy to schoolteaching. Saying it is “arguable” might suggest that the author at least thinks this premise is debatable. But she immediately points out that if parents wish to teach their children at home they have to set up a time schedule, place, and materials on the analogy of the school. The logic is consistent: If teacher means schoolteacher, then when a parent teaches, he or she has to set up a school. The author does not consider the possibility that parents teach by the fact of being parents; that parental teaching is more basic than classroom teaching; that parental teaching and the school’s teaching have to be seen as complementary forms. Her assumed meaning of teaching excludes this line of inquiry.

The assumption that “to teach” is approximately equivalent to what schoolteachers do in classrooms has the advantage of providing a simple, brief answer to the meaning of “to teach.” Socrates, lacking that clear-cut reference, can only leave us somewhat confused as to what does or does not count as teaching. Rousseau sets out to describe all the actions that might possibly fall under the category of teaching. He goes on for 500 pages without it being clear that he has covered all the ground. If one meditates on the meaning of “to teach,” it becomes distressingly obvious that the activity is not one clear-cut gesture or set of words. How exactly do we circumscribe an area so that all the gestures and ways of speaking within this area constitute the activity “to teach”? Are we indeed sure that any activity corresponds to this verb?

Consider contrasting cases. If one asks the meaning of “to eat,” we may occasionally be mistaken or there may be questionable cases. But we are confident there is an activity that most people most of the time have no doubt about. Each day they move digestible material by hand or utensil to an open mouth; chewing and swallowing are followed by the body’s reception and treatment of the material. Similarly, hundreds of other verbs have clear-cut correlatives in human life. Nearly always we can recognize cases of seeing, walking, swimming, talking, sweating, jumping, excreting, or reading.

Some activities, indicated by a single verb, are a combination of activities but are still easy to identify: driving a car, mowing the lawn, fixing a broken pipe, acting in a play. In contrast, there are other complex activities that may seem to correspond to an important verb, but we are hard put to say, “These are all the cases and only these are the cases.” What does it mean, for example, “to love,” “to govern,” or “to achieve success?” What are the gestures and forms of speaking that constitute each of these activities? Teaching seems to fall into this last category. Any attempt to define it is likely to leave us bewildered.

Hence arises the temptation to answer, “What does it mean to teach,” by saying, “I don’t know how to tell you but if you look in that classroom you will see a person doing it; teaching is what schoolteachers do.” The problem, however, is not entirely solved by that maneuver. Is everything that this person is doing part of the meaning of “to teach”? That is, if you are called a “teacher,” does each of your activities fall within “to teach”? If not, we still have to sort out the teaching and the nonteaching activities of the teacher.

Thomas Green’s The Activities of Teaching deserves extended comment because it sets out promisingly to ask and to answer just that question. Green recognizes that teaching can be broken down into dozens of activities. Such activities as explaining, questioning, and comparing are part of a set that he calls logical acts connected with teaching. He also has strategic acts, such as planning and evaluating, that are part of the execution of teaching. Finally, he has institutional acts associated with teaching, things that schoolteachers are called upon to do. His intention is to distinguish the act of teaching itself from other activities that teachers perform: “The activity of teaching can go on without the institutional activities of teaching. Teaching, in short, does not require the institutional arrangement we associate with schools. It can and does go on between father and son, for example.” His intended distinction between teaching and schoolteaching is a crucial one, though his sole example (father and son) is not very encouraging, given the modern premise of teaching as adult male confronting boy child.
What obstructs Green's analysis of teaching is his choice of "institutional acts." He lists seven such acts: collecting money, chaperoning, patrolling the halls, attending meetings, taking attendance, consulting parents, keeping reports. Green has put in this list activities that are almost always easily disconnected from the central meaning of "to teach." Hardly anyone thinks that these activities are inherent to the meaning of teaching. His intention of examining teaching in a context distinct from the school's institutional activities is a good one. But I would suggest an alternative list of school activities, ones that do get collapsed into the meaning of "to teach." These activities would include the following: being in a classroom, speaking to pupils, having pupils listen to instruction, referring to a book, writing on a chalkboard, talking about "subjects," starting a semester, passing out exams.

Because Green does not, in fact, distinguish teaching from the institutional trappings of the school, we do not hear again about father and son (or mother and daughter, rabbi and congregation, supervisor and intern, and dozens of other relations). A book that sets out to examine the activities of teaching is still about teaching as seen from behind the lectern at the front of a classroom. As I will repeatedly affirm, we do need a view of teaching from the front of the classroom, but not when this view is given within the illusion that it has been distinguished from institutional acts associated with schools.

The Activities of Teaching settles into a series of technical distinctions and elaborate arguments, but the book can never get outside the corner into which it has been painted. When he comes to make the first distinction within teaching, Green sets the direction for all that follows. He asserts, with little attempt to argue the case, that teaching breaks down into "teaching someone to do so and so" and "teaching someone that so and so is the case." The distinction is often shortened into "teaching to" and "teaching that." 44

The first of the two cases, teaching someone to do something, is clear and requires little defense. What it needs is to be taken seriously with extended discussion and examples. The second case is an amazing assumption, that one of the two main meanings of "to teach" is telling someone that so and so is the case. Is this what the instructor in the classroom does? Green seems to think so and has to spend most of the book in elaborate explanations of why and how this can be justified. No matter how much one twists and turns within "teaching someone that so and so is the case," one can never get entirely free of the suspicion that indoctrination has just become more subtle and therefore more dangerous.

No doubt telling someone that so and so is the case is something that teachers frequently do; in fact, human beings do it every day. But to assume that "teaching that so and so is the case" is one of the two ways (seemingly the main way) to teach is an amazing assumption. It begins an analysis of teaching within the narrow power arrangements that are in question today. The world remains in need of occasions when someone who knows something stands up and says, "So and so is the case." But if there is to be any hope that such teachers will speak, and equally important that they will be heard, we need a richer context for the meaning of "to teach" than theories of how to explain things to children without indoctrination.

I do not mean to scapegoat The Activities of Teaching. It is a carefully constructed book, better than most in the philosophy of education. Its author has continued to raise a clear and humane voice in educational reform. But this particular book is tragically flawed. It asks precisely the right question, namely, the meaning of "to teach" when it is distinguished from schoolteaching. But the answer fails to free teaching from the school's institutional control of the meaning of the term.

Most textbooks on "teacher preparation" or "teacher training" give up the wider, deeper meaning of "to teach" on page 1. They plunge into explaining all the activities that a (school)teacher must confront. The ethical problem of teaching, which has been present with us since Socrates and exacerbated by modern theories of education, cannot be addressed. Instead, we have idyllic and idealistic things said of education in textbooks of (school)teacher preparation. In other literature, we have cycles of elaborate praise of and snide attacks on the work of schoolteachers. Perhaps most of what is in the textbooks on teacher preparation is true, but these books need a sound grounding for the basic meaning of "to teach" so that schoolteachers have a realistic and fighting chance.