Conclusion

This book has tried to answer a single question: What is the meaning of "to teach"? The argument has necessarily been circuitous. I have proceeded by testing out a beginning meaning of "to teach" to find whether it would both open into diverse kinds of teaching and gather that diversity into a consistent whole. There cannot be a definitive proof that the argument is valid.

When describing academic criticism in chapter 6, I said that the most apt metaphor is a legal one: the teacher advocates a case before a jury. The listeners may or may not be convinced by the argument. This book is written in the language of academic criticism (with occasional help from other forms of speech) and the reader is a jury member. In my final summation, I would like to present a comparison between a first meaning of "to teach" that has dominated books in modern education (I will call it Meaning A) and a second meaning that I have argued is preferable (called here Meaning B).

I have not claimed that Meaning A ("to teach is to explain") is false or useless. It has an appealing clarity within a system of modern ideas on education. Meaning B ("to teach is to show how to live") does not contradict Meaning A; it provides a context for understanding how Meaning A became dominant but why it cannot take us far enough. One way to describe Meaning B is to say that it is a wider, broader, or more general meaning. I would resist such a description. I have not so much tried to expand the meaning of the term as to expand the conversation about that meaning. My method has been retrieval rather than invention. My task has not been to broaden the meaning because the meaning is already there, although participants in a particular conversation may not be aware of it.

Meaning B is not a general or abstract meaning that is out of touch with practical realities. On the contrary, my aim has been to start with a particular, precise, and practical meaning, one that is strong enough to bear a variety of forms. The search here has not been for a general
meaning abstracted from individual cases, but for a (nearly) universal
meaning embedded in the particular, and found by delving more deeply
into particular forms.

The most appropriate image, therefore, is not broader but deeper.
Meaning B starts more deeply and in that way is more comprehensive.
I started with a root meaning rather than a general one. I have tried to
ground the meaning of “to teach” in ordinary, earthly, bodily action. A
variety of linguistic branches grow from that root meaning. While the
root may not be visible in the branches, the vitality of teaching is still
traceable to that root.

In the paragraphs that follow, I will set out a point-by-point compar-
ison of Meaning A and Meaning B.

In Meaning A, to teach is to explain; in Meaning B, to teach is to
show someone how to do something, most comprehensively, how to
live. The agent of teaching in Meaning A is an individual human being
who is capable of giving reasons. In Meaning B, no individual human
being is capable of accomplishing the full meaning of teaching. The uni-
verse of living beings, including the example of the human community,
is the most comprehensive agent.

In Meaning A, the necessary note is intention. Where the intent to
teach is present, teaching exists; where there is no intention, there is no
teaching. In Meaning B, the necessary note is learning. The only proof
that teaching exists is that learning exists. Where there is learning,
there is teaching; where there is no learning, there is no teaching.

In both meanings, a gap in the continuity of a process exists. In
Meaning A, the gap is between teaching and learning. Two differ-
ent processes exist: teaching is one activity, learning is another. In
Meaning B, the gap is between the individual’s intention and what is
actually taught and learned. In this case, teaching-learning is a single
and continuous process, not entirely under the control of an individual.

These two gaps lead to two different interpretations of the problem
of teaching. In Meaning A, it will be said: “I taught; they didn’t learn.”
The conclusion to be drawn is: “They have a learning problem.” Mean-
ing B, in contrast, leads to the problem statement: “I tried to teach;
you didn’t learn.” The conclusion to be drawn here is: “We have a
teaching-learning problem.”

Meaning A’s response to the problem has usually been a search for
psychological causes. Meaning B’s “we have a teaching-learning prob-
lem” is likely to lead to looking for answers in economic, political,
social— as well as psychological— concerns. I intend no disrespect for
psychology, which has made some contributions to our understanding
of learning. Nevertheless, the almost complete absorption of education’s
language into psychology has severely limited the discussion of educa-
tion and teaching. Meaning B opens the conversation to all who teach.
It looks for obstacles to teach-learn in the mal-distributions of power
between adult and child, men and women, rich and poor, sick and
healthy, schooled and unschooled.

When teaching appears to fail in Meaning A, the remedy is twofold:
develop better explanations that are aligned with the child’s style and
stage of learning. Furthermore, we cannot trust that people are going
to be reasonable; most people need some direction that is coercive. In
Meaning B, the remedy is also twofold: Find out who and what are
learning. Then undertake a redesign of the situation. It may take a long
time to discover the who and the what of teaching, and our redesigns
will always be imperfect. But teaching is the best hope of humanity,
not to be cast aside for supposedly quicker and more efficient solutions,
such as more police and more prison cells. Such coercive power will
probably always be with us but should only be used as a protection of
the border of teaching, not as a regular substitute for teaching.

Meaning A is reflected in the language of “formal and informal
education.” Either the form is present and we have education, or else we
have only something deficient that claims to be education. The domi-
nant image of “formal education” is a school within which there is a
classroom in which an adult stands before a group of children seated at
desks. Meaning B does not exist in an institution called “formal educa-
tion”; instead it is found in many forms. Even within the school itself
there may be a multiplicity of forms. If it is teaching to show someone
how to live, that requires many settings in which adults interact with each
other and where children gradually enter these exchanges. I proposed
as a pattern of educational forms: family, job, classroom, retirement/
leisure. To teach is to reshape one of these forms and to reshape the
interrelation of these forms.

Finally, Meaning A of teaching is almost entirely restricted to one
form of speech: to teach is to tell. Speech has the function of conveying
knowledge from one human mind to another, usually from the trained
expert to the ignorant child. In Meaning B of teaching, there are several
families of languages and numerous cases within each family. Teaching
begins and ends in silence; between the silences, speech takes on a
variety of forms. Sometimes speech is used to urge people on to their goal; at other times speech is used to restore a sense of purpose. Speech can also be used to puzzle and provoke the mind, forcing the learner to go in search of the right questions before he or she can get answers. One setting of education differs from another by the particular mix of languages used. For example, a school and a family over a long time will include every main form of speech. They will differ in the prominence and the amount of each speech in their respective mixes of teaching languages.

That completes a point-by-point comparison of Meaning A and Meaning B of teaching. Obviously, I think that Meaning B is superior in every point of comparison. So long as Meaning B is not misunderstood as a kind of soft and sentimental generality, there are no drawbacks to affirming Meaning B. It encompasses what most people in the past have meant by teaching and it gives new seriousness to contemporary uses of “teaching” that otherwise receive only passing mention.

If the case for Meaning B is so strong, why is there such difficulty in getting a hearing and what would be necessary for it to reemerge at center stage? In the course of this book, I have suggested two main reasons behind the twentieth century's narrow meaning of "to teach."

1. The meaning of teaching as "to show someone how to live, including how to die" has moral and religious connotations. The twentieth century has been a sea of confusion about both morality and religion, not to mention the relation between them. In philosophical history, as far back as Socrates, and in religious history, including all the world's major religions, the justifying of who teaches and what is taught have been moral issues. The modern world has preferred to avoid the religious and moral as far as possible. If to teach simply means to give people reasons or to explain things, we seem to avoid all the bickerings of religion and the uncertainties of morality.

There is nonetheless a moral assumption here, namely, that reasons and explanations are desirable and that no sane person can object to being given reasons. The ideal of universal schooling is based on this assumption. Children are confined to schools because they are not yet reasonable adults. Schoolteachers are given license to explain things to children until the children can think for themselves. I readily agree that children receiving explanations in classrooms is a better alternative than what most children in history have faced. The problem is in reducing the meaning of teaching to this one, unusual form.

Conclusion

The attempt to avoid all moral and religious issues has not entirely succeeded. Outside a narrowly circumscribed area of mathematics and science, teachers do not rely exclusively on rational explanations based on objective fact. John Dewey in the 1930s could hold out "scientific method" as the ideal against which all teaching had to be patterned. Since then, however, it has become obvious that classroom instructors in any discipline, not excluding physical science, have to rely on interpretation of data, and must appeal to imaginative, aesthetic, and subjective considerations.

Reason has proved to be a powerful instrument for the human journey; reason has also proved to be a dangerous power if it eliminates what precedes and surrounds it. As Martin Buber said of consciousness, reason ought to play first violin but not try to be conductor. Reason is at the service of life; teaching as the giving of reasons should be at the service of teaching how to live. But if living is the more comprehensive object of teaching, where can we find teachers of how to live? Should we turn our classrooms over to gurus and prophets?

My answer has been twofold. We have to protect the classroom against gurus and prophets if these terms connote preaching messages, indoctrinating young minds, and forming disciples. The classroom is a place for thoughtful conversation carried out in measured speech. But that does not mean that religion and morality should be excluded from the conversation. Religion becomes irrational and morality becomes mindless if they are declared unworthy of serious attention in the classroom.

The other part of the response is to recognize that the classroom's contribution to the moral and religious dimensions of education has always been a minor one. The answer to the question "where do we find teachers of how to live" is that they are already here and doing their job: parents, friends, political and religious leaders; if we would recognize them and name them as teachers, we could help them to do their job better.

The assumption in the late nineteenth century that religion was soon to disappear and that "moral education" could be handled with a few new twists has proved to be naive. We need a coalition of teachers — human and nonhuman — to face up to the moral and religious crisis that threatens to tear apart the world.

2. The second underlying issue in the narrowing of teach/teaching/teacher is closely related to the first. I refer to the growth of the school
system and the better preparation of schoolteachers. For the modern school to fulfill its purpose, full-time, "professional educators" were needed. During the last century and a half, the "teacher," it has been assumed, is a member of this group. Teaching is therefore thought to be the work of the "teaching profession." To challenge the meaning of teaching is to run up against a thick wall of professional control.

There is a certain irony, I realize, in complaining about the control exercised by professional educators. Schoolteachers have had a long journey, not yet completed, to be recognized as a profession at all. In the nineteenth century, when schoolteaching switched from being a man's to a woman's job, many writers described schoolteaching as an extension of the one profession for which women were suited: motherhood. Since then, schoolteachers (along with nurses) have struggled to go beyond what Amitai Etzioni called "semi-proessions" and enter the full status of professions.

Becoming a profession looks deceptively easy. Numerous groups take on the trappings of a profession (a code of ethics, a set of credentials, an annual conference, a journal, and so forth) and declare themselves to be a profession. It is another thing, however, for the public to recognize that a group has an area of knowledge and skill under its control, and is capable of offering a sustained service to a community.

The difficulty that schoolteachers have had in establishing their professional claim is that most people think they know what teaching a 6-year-old entails. In contrast, most people are mystified by the talk of lawyers, accountants, and civil engineers. Actually, people are correct when they claim some knowledge of how to teach a 6-year-old; a great many people do have that experience. However, very few people have the knowledge, skill, and dedication to teach 6-year-olds in a classroom. For that, one needs talent, training, and dedication. If schoolteachers would name their profession more accurately, admitting its continuity with teaching in ordinary life, they would get both support as professionals in a distinctive work and cooperation from parents and others whose work has some similarity.

For most of the past 150 years, it has been feared that to admit a continuity with ordinary life would weaken the claim to professionalization. And, indeed, the modern professions have depended upon a perception that their work is so arcane that it is beyond the mere layperson's understanding. The medical profession led the way to the top of professional status, paving the way for tax accountants and mortgage closers. However, in the last two decades a turn seems to have been taken, led again by the medical profession. Having succeeded in isolating their esoteric knowledge from the laity, physicians found themselves losing the trust of the public and being hit with malpractice suits.

Physicians today are being pressed to redesign their relation to other professionals and to the (medical) laity. The emerging result is a new configuration, centered on health not medicine, in which the physician is still a central player but is part of a team. Included in that team is the patient who must learn about health and what to do for his or her body. In the health professions, there can be many concentric circles of expert knowledge but there is no room for a laity, that is, people totally ignorant of health concerns.

The schoolteachers who had seemed to trail behind in the modern professional world may turn out to have an advantage. The link to teaching in ordinary life can place the schoolteachers into immediate relation with the adults and children being served. Every profession in the future has to be a teaching profession in which the aim is to share knowledge rather than hide it in impenetrable jargon. Those who are skillful at instruction are a key to the reformation of professional life.

My resistance to the control of "teaching" by professional schoolteachers is not meant as a disparagement of teaching in school. I believe there is no greater profession in the world of work. However, the case for this profession needs strengthening in U.S. society. The language we have inherited from the nineteenth century tends to flowery praise of teachers but not enough economic and political support for the work of schools and their teachers.

I have proposed that schoolteachers let go of the one word they have in their grasp: teaching. They have to stop talking about the "teaching profession." It may seem that I am asking for professional educators to commit suicide, but it is a stronger profession that interests me. If we start with teaching as showing someone how to do something, school people are challenged to examine their special ways of teaching. Both classroom instructors and performance coaches have a fund of experience that needs to be tapped into. They also need linguistic help to draw from that experience and get help for their work. If this were to happen, we would then be on the way to combining the strongest meaning of teaching with a more solidly grounded profession of schoolteaching.

Conclusion