Teacher as 'Consciousness of the Collective'

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The word *teach* is derived from the Old English *tacn*, which meant something like "sign"—and by which any object or event could potentially serve as a teacher. The act of teaching, that is, was originally understood strictly in terms of its effect on the learner, not at all in terms of any deliberate effort to affect learning. To teach was to perturb; a teaching was, to borrow from Gregory Bateson (1979), any difference that makes a difference.

Conceived in these terms, it is not difficult to appreciate how such a broad range of philosophical traditions can so readily absorb the word *teaching* into the particular senses they make of the relationship between experience and learning. For example, conceptions of teaching that were oriented by ancient mystical traditions framed teaching in terms of drawing out knowings and identifications that were thought to be already present, deeply inscribed in one's being; hence the term *education*, from the Latin *educare*, meaning literally "to draw out." The metaphor "teaching as educating" was understood as a sort of deliberate sign-posting activity in which the teacher sought to prompt the learner toward fulfillment of potential (or, most often the recovery of a lost wholeness).

The same sort of hermeneutic attitude could be brought to bear on the conception of teaching that arose alongside rationalist in the Western world. Rationalist thinking underlies the rise of the term *instructor*, so prominent in university settings these days. The metaphor of "teaching as instructing"

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is affiliated with rationalist insistence on a pristine, logical structure of any valid claim to truth. From this insistence arises the pedagogue's task, which came to be understood in terms of unambiguous, straightforward, rational presentations of impeccable truths. The word *instructor* is so common today that we forget it is about giving instructions, not to mention its other, more sinister entailments.

Similar analyses could be offered for conceptions of teaching anchored in religious, empiricist, structuralist, post-structuralist, ecological or complexity discourses—one account of which I've offered elsewhere (Davis, 2004). For now, the critical point is that the words that various traditions take as metaphors for, or synonyms to, teaching are neither inert nor benign. These terms come with baggage on issues such as implicit conceptions of knowledge, learning, learners, and the purposes of education.

So, on to the question: What might complexity thinking say about teaching?

I'll begin by offering a few terms that have popped up in the education literature over the past few decades that, I think, offer a window on complexivist teaching: *improvising*, *occasioning*, *caring*, *conversing*, *hermeneutic listening*, *mindful participation*, *engaging minds*, *structurally coupling*. These sorts of notions point to what Donald (2002) calls a "coupling of consciousnesses"—a uniquely human capacity to coordinate attentional systems and to synchronize brain functioning, in effect presenting the possibility of grander cognitive unities. Compared to individual capacities, collectively humans are able to keep vastly more ideas in mind, to make much more impressive connective links, and so on. As Donald develops, this possibility of collective mind is biologically rooted, but greatly enabled by language and other social conventions.

Given this capacity for complex, communal cognition, what is the role of the teacher? On this issue, I think a powerful possibility is offered through the metaphor of "teaching as the consciousness of the (classroom) collective."

Four critical points are necessary to make sense of this suggestion. First, human consciousness depends on social collectivity, at the same time as it is personal and individual. As Donald argues, human cognitive systems (or minds) are hybrid, depending on both an individual brain and various levels of collectivity. Making sense of consciousness, then, demands a certain transdisciplinarity—which, in turn, entails a sort of 'level-jumping' across neurological, psychological, social, cultural and other phenomena. One must be willing and able to think in terms of many nested systems, not some isolatable realm. Education in general, and teaching in particular, demand a similar sort of level-jumping.

Second, further developing the notion of communal cognition, the classroom community can and should be understood as a learner—not a *collection of learners*, but a *collective learner*—with a coherence and evolving identity all its own (see Davis & Simmt, 2003). Third, drawing on recent consciousness studies, it has become clear over the past century that personal consciousness is more a commentator than a controller. It doesn't direct, it orients as it contributes to the reworking of the parts the constitute our perceptual wholes. When something bubbles to the surface of consciousness, it frames what we might notice or look for, without dictating what will be noticed or sought out (Norretranders, 1998). What one knows and who one is, then, are not determined by consciousness, but they are utterly dependent on consciousness—in very much the same way that learning is not determined by teaching, but is dependent on it.

The metaphor of "teacher as the consciousness of the collective," then, is a suggestion that the teacher is responsible for prompting differential attention, selecting among the options for action and interpretation that arise in the collective.

This formulation, of course, only makes sense insofar as there are options for action and interpretation that might be selected—which brings me to the fourth element. I'll frame this point with a recent quote from neurologist Antonio Damasio (2005):

> [I]n the nervous system, as much as the immune system, selection from among diverse elements is more important than instruction to shaping functional structure. (p. 172)

Replace the phrase "nervous system" with "classroom," and you have an important truth about collective knowing and the role of the teacher. The teacher's task is not just to select from among those possibilities that present themselves to her or his awareness. A vital preliminary task has to do with ensuring that diverse interpretive possibilities are present in the classroom.

So framed, teaching cannot be about zeroing in on predetermined conclusions. It can't be about the replication and perpetuation of the existing possible. Rather, teaching seems to be more about expanding the space of the possible and creating conditions for the emergence of the as-yet unimagined. So complexivist teaching is not about prompting a convergence onto pre-existent truths, but about divergence into new interpretive possibilities. The emphasis is not only on what is, but also what might be brought forth. It comes to be a participation in a recursively elaborative process of opening up new spaces of possibility by exploring current spaces.

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