

1 'Teaching is the profession that creates all others'

The teachers' world

The teachers' world and the non-teachers' world: to be sure, the same laws of human interaction apply. Teachers are as selfless or as selfish, as kind or as unkind, as engaging or as boring, as political or as non-political, as loving or as non-loving, as abstemious or as indulgent as everyone else. If you prick them, they bleed; if you tickle them, they laugh; if you poison them, they die.

But, notwithstanding their bleeding, their laughing and their dying, teachers are members of a race (as Shylock was) apart. They work with children. This means that their everyday conversation differs from the rest of the world's conversation. Teachers' conversation is often geared to understanding experiences that children have: waking early and feeling lonely, Christmas mornings, the first day of the holidays, minor betrayals on the playground, bullying, friendship and its strength and its frailty, family breakdowns. Children's experiences are sometimes more intense than adults' experiences, even though the years they have lived are fewer. Crucially, teachers remember their own experiences of childhood. And not only remember them. They align them, somehow, with their lives as they are now. They remember disappointments, family breakdowns, even minor betrayals on the playground, and they remember them with a peculiar intensity.

It is rarely noted that teachers' conversations with children don't use certain registers ever present in much adult conversation. Teachers exclude profanity and casual swearing, for example, in their work, even though these registers are present (odd, this) in much children's conversation. Generally, except in particular circumstances, they exclude anything about sex, though children are interested in it and almost certainly they think and talk about it. And teachers' conversations with children, sometimes unnecessarily, are generally composed of shorter, simpler sentences than conversations among adults.

Teachers' ability to understand and empathise with children's conversation impresses many lay people to whom the business of managing a classroom is a mystery. After all, teachers are responsible for twenty-odd vulnerable humans simultaneously, all with their different personalities and learning styles. Many recognise this. 'You're a teacher?' they say, glancing sideways, as you politely eat the first course at a dinner party. 'Better you than me!' Indeed, this responsibility is a heavier one than any weighing down the shoulders of electricians, backbench MPs and Ofsted inspectors, apart from exceptional tasks such as making unsafe wiring systems safe, voting to go to war or judging a school on a three-day visit.

Occasionally, those outside the profession suggest that there is something essentially good about what teachers do. Teachers' principles for action (as with doctors, nurses, social workers and others) are largely a regard for, if not a love for, others. It is often understood that teachers have foregone choices of profession (or even left a profession) that might have made them rich. And this is often true: I have just met a London teacher who gave up a job as a legal personal assistant to train on the Graduate Teacher Programme. 'My salary was halved, but now I'm doing what I love ... I'm doing something to help people have better lives'.

Others are impressed by the sheer effort teachers have made during their training and early practice to understand children. The way children think, write and draw is, teachers seem to understand, well, interesting. The things children say are worth more than the casual anecdote.

But others are not impressed. They suspect that the teacher next to them at the dinner table has chosen a world in which she can dominate people simply by being physically, mentally and spiritually bigger. Perhaps the word 'bully' hovers behind some of these people's thinking. And a teacher, for many, is someone who has avoided the rough and tumble of the business world with its highs and lows, its risks, its falls. With its poor pay but secure pension, the teaching profession is not quite the real world. I always want to tell them that teaching is the profession that creates all others.

And to many non-teachers, school is something from which you escape. Teachers have escaped and then chosen to go back. When, at that dinner table, you say you are a teacher, they look at you and simultaneously remember classrooms and the smell of chalk, the smell from the toilets, tasteless school dinners or the peeling paint on the classroom wall.

Voices from the non-teaching world

I talked to some non-teachers to put this thinking into a human context. Sometimes, people decide early in life that teaching might not be the right career for them because teachers supplied what my friend called:

bad role models ... it was a prep school, and I thought they were living in a very artificial environment, that they couldn't cope in the real world. I know that's wrong now. The teachers I know seem to be able to deal with anything ...

Another non-teacher wrote to me:

The main reason why I didn't teach is because I did have a hard time in the last two years of secondary school (from other kids and some awful teachers!), which sapped my confidence somewhat. Perhaps I should have thought that I could have done a better job myself, but by then the damage had been done. Another reason is because I have never had or wanted children myself, so I suppose I didn't feel a natural empathy with children, which I think is a key thing for becoming a good teacher.

Here, at least in part, a bad school experience was significant.

Other people just know they don't want to teach:

Actually I never even considered becoming a teacher, because I've never really got on that well with children ... I couldn't see myself spending my days surrounded by small people, or teenagers ...

I fear now that my questions were badly formed and made people feel that they ought to be teachers, which I didn't intend, and that therefore they were slightly defensive in their answers. Another non-teacher wrote, unconsciously perhaps, agreeing with the views of many who have become teachers:

I thought about it for about thirty seconds, but no longer because it is too hard and I think the national curriculum is silly. The testing system seems to me self-defeating and it felt like training dogs to jump through hoops. Also, I think I do not like being an 'authority figure'. And I have too much to learn to be able to teach ...

Indeed, the best teachers could reiterate that last sentence, but they might twist it: 'I have too much to learn, so I *must* teach ...' A Latin proverb says: 'By learning you will teach; by teaching you will learn'.

Here is vocation in its raw state. It's another non-teacher:

No, I never seriously considered becoming a teacher, largely because God stepped in first with the call to preach. My brief experience as a temporary (and unqualified) teacher convinced me, if I needed convincing, (a) that it was something I probably could do, given my stubborn and persevering, yea adamant, nature, but (b) would take little pleasure in because of the unremitting sense of 'it's either them or me' in the classroom (it really was a blackboard jungle at — in those bad old days).

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He went on to describe a city comprehensive in the seventies (later closed), and he reminded me of one of Lenny Bruce's jokes: 'I won't say our school was rough, but we had our own coroner ... We used to have to write essays on "What I will do if I grow up"'.

Teaching – a vocation?

The word 'vocation' comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call. To have a vocation is like knowing you're going to be a priest or a minister. As most of us do, I fantasised about other jobs. For me, the daydream was about being a great fast bowler or an orchestral conductor, but I had weak arms, insufficient height to bowl a bouncer, no skill and (though I loved music) a lazy ear. I was left (like millions of others) with the ability to love both cricket and music, an encyclopaedic knowledge of the former, a passable one of the latter. But I possessed skill in neither. Anyway, in the real world I wanted to teach from the age of eleven. In fact, I knew I was going to be a teacher.

But not having an obvious vocation doesn't mean you won't be a brilliant teacher. Others discover in subtler, slower ways that they want to teach. While some are converted, like me, suddenly, others find that the conversion takes time. But it is no less (or more) certain for that. It is still a vocation. I asked some teachers about this: How did they decide to become a teacher?

I was about nine and I didn't like to go to my temporary school in Bradford. It was so different from what I was used to in Dunmow [Essex]. My grandmother taught children with Down's Syndrome in a church hall. They weren't in the education system, that didn't happen till many years later either. So whenever I could I got out of my school ('Mummy, I don't feel very well. Can I go with Grandma?') and went to the church hall.

It's a cliché to say those children are loveable, but it's true. They gave so much, and I wanted to give back. I was only nine. Special needs chose me before teaching did. Apart from spells with evening classes, I've taught special needs all my career because of those children in Bradford.

Another friend said, rather sadly, echoing that Latin proverb: 'I wanted to teach because I wanted to keep on learning. I believed that education would change the world. I lost all that after about fifteen years.'

The calling may lead to joy, or it may lead to disillusionment. It probably will lead, of course, to something between the two.

Choosing a career – or a job?

The word ‘career’ is not always the right word these days. It once signified a choice that one made in one’s teens, twenties or thirties, that was supposed, as *The Book of Common Prayer* puts it, ‘not to be taken in hand unadvisedly’, and to last, like a marriage, ‘for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health’, till death you and it did part. But as the hymn says, ‘change and decay in all around I see’: nothing, neither career nor marriage is deemed once and for all anymore. I know teachers who left the profession to go into nursing, football coaching and eventually football management, and at least one who did the latter but the other way round: managed a football club and then became a PE teacher.

I’ve known carpenters who have become teachers. I’ve known an Anglo-Catholic priest who became one, then went back to his altar. What seems certain to those who predict the future is that from now on there will be no certainty. We will all have to be more flexible in our working lives. So choose to teach, if you want or if you are called, but don’t assume you will be doing it forever.

The saloon bar and the classroom

I am not suggesting here that teachers never go into saloon bars. The phrase stands for the kind of opinions, by no means all unenlightened, routinely expressed in the non-teachers’ world. Everybody has something to say about teaching, and often, in my local, views are expressed freely and loudly by two men always at the same corner of the bar.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, everybody has been to school and therefore everybody has memories of their education. I am going to have much to say about memories in Chapter 2. Secondly, most people have children and therefore, of course, have strong opinions about how their children should be taught. Many of these opinions may be based on hearsay; they may be ill-informed; they may be based on a vested interest; they almost certainly will be out of date. But no-one will suggest that parents have no right to hold an opinion, whether those opinions are fuelled by local bitter or not. All this makes talking about teaching different from talking about, say, electrical engineering, politics or inspecting schools, of which almost all of us have no experience and therefore no opinions.

Another difference between the two worlds – the teachers’ world and the non-teachers’ world – is that the teachers’ world is largely insulated from what I call saloon bar culture. Casual racism and sexism are either absent or suppressed in schools. This is not so in the conversations of my acquaintances in my local. And

that saloon bar culture is not only found in saloon bars. I recently ate microwaved soup in a tea shop in a remote village in north Norfolk, and the proprietor invited me to agree, within five minutes of making my acquaintance, that criminals should be hanged because then ‘the prisons would only be half-full’. Surely, I thought, they would be empty. In any case, even if a teacher believed it, this view simply would not be expressed (it might be suppressed) in a school staffroom.

This book’s main aim is to offer guidance to four sets of readers while they decide whether teaching is for them. I like to think it will fit into the back pocket or the handbag.

Four groups of readers

Most of you reading this book will be in one of four groups:

- students reading for first degrees and considering career options, including a Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE)
- graduates considering qualification through the SCITT (School-centred Initial Teacher Training) schemes run by local authorities
- men and women thinking about training as mature students while their children grow up, or as their present jobs begin to bore or distress them, who will probably be considering the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP).
- sixth formers and students living between school and university and considering BA degrees with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) or TQs in Scotland considering courses in HEIs.

Also interested might be your parents, partners and families. Others might be those whose work involves the notion of a calling: priests and ministers who lead school assemblies, school governors, doctors, nurses, journalists specialising in education perhaps. Some might read what follows and end up in a few years reflecting sadly that ‘I believed that education (or religion, or health, or journalism) would change the world, but I lost all that ...’ Others, though, and here I narrow the focus down to teachers, will find that, after forty years, children still give delight; that their world can be changed.

Another group might be Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) who find that their experience in schools nudges them towards training as teachers.

What is a teacher?

A teacher, of course, for our purposes is an adult with certain qualifications who ‘shows’ children knowledge, usually in a school. I’ve put ‘shows’ in inverted commas because the Greek word for ‘teach’ is related to the word for ‘show’.

But in a broader sense of the word, we are all teachers. In daily talk, whether we find it tedious or boring, whether we talk animatedly and listen with eyes wide, whether we yawn and wish we could go to the pub, we teach each other: we ‘show’ each other things. And thereby we learn, and teach. Every relationship – father–child, friend–friend, publisher–writer, inspector–teacher – is a two-way educational relationship. Marriages obviously are. Husband and wife teach with a glorious, terrifying intensity. In the immortal, desperate words of Basil Fawlty, ‘Understand me’, the couple seems to be saying to each other, ‘understand me, before one of us dies ...’

So, ‘educational relationship’ is a tautology.

To relate to someone = to teach + to learn. Learning, as I have already said, always travels in two directions, not one. Education is active, potent and energetic. It is on the move in unexpected, even mysterious ways. It has wonders to perform.

Schooling isn’t what it’s about

Nearly everyone, even the best teacher, finds this difficult to acknowledge, because ‘teacher’ and ‘education’ remind most of us of ‘schooling’. Here comes a long sentence. I’d better put it in its own paragraph:

If I think of my schooling, I think of assemblies and singing ‘Eternal Father strong to save’, although my school was sixty miles from the sea, and ‘We plough the fields and scatter’, though few of us had seen a sheaf of wheat; of long play-times when I didn’t know what to do; of being put in stream 4 and then being suddenly promoted to stream 1 because I could read, the results (which most of the children *couldn’t* read, but which I could) being posted on the wall; of school journeys I half wanted to go on and half didn’t, that my parents couldn’t afford; of being bullied and once on a shameful occasion of bullying; of holding Jeanette’s hand during country dancing (she was the prettiest Year 6 girl); of listening to the history teacher reading notes which we had to copy down for British History; of not being caned because, unlike some of my friends, I could play the school game; of being in set 3 for maths until they invented set 4 and put it in the hapless hands of a new, very young teacher who ‘couldn’t keep control’, while set 1 was taught by the head of maths; of being considered not worth too much because I’d settled for college of education rather than university, and, and, and ...



Figure 1.1

It was schooling, obviously, but if it was education, it was only incidentally so. I learned more from Jeanette than I did from the history teacher (not, regrettably, that I learned much from her). Those teachers were *teaching* me, yes, but were they teaching me what they thought they were teaching me? The school was teaching me cynicism in the matter of the sudden invention of set 4 and the introduction of a thin, inept young man asked to face fifteen spotty youths who had already given up on maths. Were they teaching what I needed to be taught? Were they just schooling me?

Of course, that is unfair. I passed most of my O levels (the equivalent of GCSEs today) and went on to the sixth form and passed an A level. Someone (a maths teacher) took me in a group to hear the *Messiah* at the Royal Albert Hall. Someone else took me to the cathedrals at Rochester and Canterbury. Someone else took me to see the young Judi Dench in *Henry IV Part One* at the Old Vic. And a music teacher made us sing 'Linden Lea' and 'The Vagabond' and, for multiculturalism's sake, the French National Anthem. I hope he would be pleased to know that I can still get through all three from memory.

And I developed an obsession with words: how they were formed, how they grew and what, in skilled hands, they could do. But it is significant that all these experiences, except for the singing, happened both outside the school and outside

the curriculum. In those places, schooling was less obvious and less conventional than is usual. It was in the Royal Albert Hall, in the crypt at Canterbury, in a theatre stall, in the music room singing William Barnes’ and Robert Louis Stevenson’s words set to Ralph Vaughan Williams’ music where my life was changed; where (except for the music room) there were ordinary people, non-teachers, non-students, walking about, going about their business.

Though obviously the two words are connected, ‘schooling’ and ‘education’ do not mean the same thing. Schooling is static rather than dynamic. Its ways have no mystery at all. It’s lining up on the playground and being silent in assembly while the tardier classes file mutely in. It is control and discipline. It is class lists, order and tests. Necessary, yes, but no wonder that it may ring dull notes on our bell and make us feel negative about the profession we are considering.

It shouldn’t. Put schooling out of your minds. When we think about possibly becoming a teacher, we should think about learning. Of course, you’ll have to school the children: make them safe, for example, and check they’re present when they are, mark them absent when they’re not. But schooling is not the central issue. For the same kind of reason, the word ‘training’ is problematic, too. Follow its metaphor: it’s about being pulled along preordained tracks. However, given its predominance in education, its mention is of course unavoidable in a book like this one.

So what is teaching about?

As I’ve written, we are all learners and all teachers, in two senses: we are all both, and we all do both all the time. Much as it is true that we cannot talk without learning, we cannot pray, meditate, or build a relationship without it either. We cannot even think (converse with ourselves, I could say) without learning. Learning the truth has been the major preoccupation of western humankind (apart from survival, both of the individual and of the race) since before the times of the pre-Socratic philosophers in Greece until the present day, and the same is true of the eastern thinkers. And, in any case, survival is *learning* how to survive.

Mature men and women reflect on learning as their children grow. They can’t help it, much as their babies can’t help learning. They watch their babies’ eyes from the moment of birth, they hear their first gurgles, then their first attempts at words, then their first words. When the children are (at last!) asleep, parents can’t help but reflect, however unsystematically, on what they have seen and heard. So they understand that learning is going on all the time. They have begun the process of educating their children, simply by looking into their eyes, and responding to them.

The value that their experiences as parents will bring to their teaching (should they choose to become teachers in a school) is inestimable. In the most powerful way possible, they have inducted babies into the mystery of human love and they have achieved this within seconds of their children's birth. Here are some examples:

- They have helped their children to become scientists by looking at the movement of branches in the wind or at the rhythm of waves on a beach.
- They have helped them to become readers by reading (at first) to them and (later) with them.
- On holidays, they have pointed out trees and rocks, cathedrals and palaces, the characters at Disneyland, and this has helped the children to become observers, intense lookers. And looking is a prerequisite not only for artists, but also for natural scientists, architects and critics, for plumbers, electricians and mechanics.
- They have also helped their children in the first steps in what is called 'socialisation', and this has begun the process of becoming a citizen. In that process, they will have been educated themselves, both by their children and by (not quite the same thing) their interaction with their children.

So parents who decide to teach have advantages over the rest of us.

The readers in the other groups who might become teachers, including students working towards first degrees or following PGCE, sixth formers, most (though not all) SCITT students and some GTP students, may not have had these experiences. But they will bring different advantages: youth, with its mental energy, idealism and enthusiasm, and recent access to their own studies. They too have been teachers when explaining, for example, a passion for their music, or for football, or for photography, or for computers and what they can do and what they will soon be able to do, or for the stars, or for whatever they might have an obsession for.

Here is a truth that underpins everything that teachers do. It has an unspoken presence all the time when teachers meet children. Lawrence Stenhouse sums it up in one sentence: 'The purpose of education is to make us freer and more creative' (1975). It helps us to understand that we are human beings, not cogs in a machine; that we can look back on things that we have made – an apple strudel, a repair to a plumbing system, a poem, and say, 'That's good!'

Teaching isn't about getting our class into assembly on time, or about phonemes, or even about teaching historical, scientific and geographical facts. It's not about coming top of a list. It's about the state of the world and about making it more just, about making things through a search for the truth. It is vital to recog-

nise this at the outset and to accept that therefore it is both a huge responsibility and a huge delight. Because of that search for the truth, there is nobility in the scruffy, increasingly chancy, ill-paid profession of teaching. The search for truth is the same as the search for freedom and creativity. It is the artist in us that shows us and our masters and mistresses that we are human beings and not hired hands existing to service the economy.

The importance of education as a tool to find freedom is negatively shown by tyrants who attempt to trammel it, who know it is a threat to their regimes. Hitler wrote that ‘Universal education is the most corroding and disintegrating poison that liberalism has ever constructed for its own destruction’ (quoted in Grey, 2003). It has even more power to destroy reactionary values. Henry VIII knew this when he wrecked the monasteries, where knowledge was acquired and written down under candles by monks. But somewhere in England, one monk went on writing. One candle kept burning.

It is also, paradoxically, or so it might look, democratic. We are, as I have said earlier in this chapter, all teachers. So being a teacher professionally links us to every human being. But it links us in particular with all who take responsibility in a classroom. And, more to the point of this book, it links us with the tribe of children, a tribe of which every one of us has been a member, and whose present members know more than is acknowledged about the world, its trees, its waves on shores, its animals, its loves and hates. All they need is a methodology to help them understand more. That’s our job.

Here is just one example from a recent trip to north-west England: I am watching nine-year-old, crop-haired, skinny Glenn. He has severe hearing loss and is normally (I am told) a disruptive boy. He is staring at the River Wear four miles above Durham with a clipboard in his arms and a sheet of A4 and pencil in his hand. He gazes intensely as a laser beam at the water as its bottle greens become creamy white over the rocks, as the chicks roll, tumble and right themselves. Changing him from troubled normality to such engagement is as much changing the world as I need. Helping someone to ‘notice such things’, if only for an hour, will do. Looking, with as much objectivity as possible, calms and sensitises the looker; it is not only pleasurable, but provides a basis for feeling and learning.

Changing the world globally is for few of us, thank goodness. We probably wouldn’t do it well. But we can do this well: transform a child’s life for an hour, a week, a term, a year, maybe a whole lifetime.

Education as a business

For one GTP student, the advantages of his chosen course were simply expressed: ‘A 14k salary ... it was quick – 12 months to QTS status ... theory kept to a minimum’. He wrote on a questionnaire that the aim of teaching is ‘to prepare children for living in a capitalist society’. He aimed, within ten years, to be either ‘teaching in another country ... or running my own private tuition company ...’ He added, ‘There are too many areas of education “not working”!’

‘I don’t like what they do to the enemy’, as Wellington said of his troops before the battle of Waterloo, and as I thought of these responses, ‘but by G— they frighten me’.

I wasn’t paying enough attention while education was changing from a calling into a business. I glimpsed the creep of the new values when I was still a head-teacher. I was beginning my second headship in 1982. Someone told us on our induction course that one responsibility was ‘managing the school plant’. All I could think of, for a few nonplussed minutes, was the Swiss cheese plants, the spider plants, the cacti, the tradescantias that I always put round the school when I started on my first headship. But the Chief Education Officer and his underlings meant grounds, building, maintenance. I recoiled. I didn’t want to manage them! I wanted to learn! I wanted to teach!

The questions buzzed around my head and they still do. If education is a business where what matters is profit and not people, whose interests does it serve? The company that funds a school and its shareholders? The profit motive? The parents? The teachers? The childrens? I remember a teacher saying, years ago, that one purpose of education is to help children to resist the blandishments of capitalism. I agreed with him then, and I do now. If children can become capable of reasoned judgements about advertising, for example, they are more likely to be able to make reasoned judgements about poetry, paintings, television programmes, music and every other artistic and media event that surrounds their lives. More importantly, a critical faculty will help them, when they see advertisements for loans that will erase poverty in two years or creams that will erase pimples within a week, to keep at the front of their minds the questions: Who is this who is lying to me? And why is he or she doing it?

City academies are the most egregious examples I’ve come across (so far) of the business ethic inside education. Although government lets the public believe that private concerns fund a school, they don’t. Those concerns – whether they are churches, private schools or billionaire-backed businesses – pay tiny amounts. They set the school up, but the taxpayer pays the rest. The real beneficiaries are the private sponsors themselves, who revel in all the fluffy, cuddly publicity. See Francis Beckett’s article on sponsored schools ‘Sell ‘em cheap’ in the *Guardian* (2007a), and his recent book (2007b).