A Question of Judgment: A Response to Standards for the Education, Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators in British Columbia
(British Columbia College of Teachers)

The Action-Centred Teaching Group

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The Action-Centred Teaching group came together ten years ago at the University of British Columbia when we became involved in an educational conversation that we were not prepared to finish. While pursuing graduate work in education and teaching in the faculty’s teacher education program a few of us started to talk about teaching as a fundamentally human endeavour. We moved away from notions of management, technique, and policy and, through our dialogue, started to explore the complicated relationship between the teacher and the taught. Finally we were having a conversation that got at what drives us and troubles us in our work as educators.

We began to invite respected colleagues into the group as our conversation continued. We are diverse in our training, experience, and job descriptions, but we are connected by our passion for imagining what is possible in education and unwilling to surrender the dialogue any time soon. The essay that follows reflects our effort to engage ourselves and other educators in a conversation about a recent policy initiative by the British Columbia College of Teachers concerning Standards for the Education, Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators in British Columbia.

We have spent much of our careers grappling with the critical questions raised in the College’s Standards for the Education, Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators in British Columbia and share the College’s concern for understanding what counts as good teaching and how we might judge good teaching (especially our own). Indeed, these questions helped motivate the formation of our group eight
years ago and our subsequent collective research efforts.

We read the document carefully and optimistically, and discussed our various interpretations of the Standards as a group and with colleagues (e.g., at last year’s UBC “Talking About Teaching” seminars). We accept the test that the Standards sets for its own validity: “A classroom teacher, an administrator, or a curriculum coordinator should feel ownership of the standards and take pride in saying to the world, ‘I am a professional and this is what I do’” (p. 5). As classroom teachers, administrators, and teacher educators, we recognize some of what we understand as good teaching in the current document. We also note that critical aspects of what we believe to be part of good teaching are absent and our response is intended to expand the understanding of what counts as good teaching in the Standards.

Two Views of Good Teaching

On the one hand, the Standards is clear about what counts as good teaching. Teaching is a professional activity and “professions are called practices because those who work within them are developing their professional knowledge and skill throughout their careers” (p. 6). Attaining the requisite “specialized knowledge, skills, and methods” helps professional teachers promote the ends of “student achievement and self-actualization” (p. 5) embodied in the “specific subjects and curriculum of B.C.” (p. 4). Ends and means are understood as distinct and professional teachers focus on finding appropriate means to create “high quality learning environments” (p. 4) to attain those ends; indeed teachers themselves are characterized as a “medium for the transmission and translation of knowledge, skills, culture and values” (p. 4).

On the other hand, the Standards describes teaching as involving both ends and means simultaneously. Teaching should aim at “the preparation of citizens to live productive and fulfilled lives” by relating “intellectually, pedagogically and ethically with children” (p. 4). Teaching so conceived is “a moral activity intended to benefit both the individual citizen and society” (p. 4). Added to knowledge, skills, and methods are concerns for ethics, principles, and service, none of which is a clear and definitive end. Indeed, in these passages, the Standards echoes Larry Cuban’s (1993, p. 185) description of how the ends and means of teaching are enmeshed: “How we teach becomes what we teach.”
**Teaching As Professional Practice**

It might be that the *Standards* merely acknowledges the obvious: teaching is a professional activity involving considerations of both expertise and service (Larson, 1977), that is, teaching practice involves both epistemological and ethical concerns. Such recognition, however, avoids grappling with fundamental tensions in conceptions of teaching and in deciding what counts as good teaching. The difference, for example, between understanding educational teaching as attaining pre-determined ends or as finding the ends in context with others is not trivial.

Indeed, such a distinction has preoccupied some of the major figures in Western scholarship for several thousand years, beginning with Plato and Aristotle through Kant to the work of relatively contemporary thinkers such as Gadamer, Arendt, and Habermas and their educational interpreters (e.g., Jardine, 1998; Greene, 1978; Young, 1990). In grappling with such distinctions Aristotle used different words to capture contrasting forms of practice: practice as *poiesis* or “production” and practice as *praxis* or “action,” a distinction maintained by many contemporary scholars.[1]

*Poiesis* is a means-end activity where the desired ends determine the required means. Aristotle uses shipbuilding as an example of *poiesis*: the image of the finished vessel helps shipbuilders select the appropriate means. Teaching understood as *poiesis* includes, for example, deciding what children should learn, organizing so that they might learn what are deemed desirable knowledge, skills, or dispositions, setting up a classroom, writing report cards. Clearly much of teaching is *poiesis* and many of the standards reflect this view of teaching practice (e.g., Standards 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10).

Teaching understood as *praxis*, however, begins from different assumptions. *Praxis* is concerned with ethical action and the ultimate end of *praxis* is to act well, to lead a good and worthwhile life, an activity that inevitably involves relationships with other people and the intertwining of ends and means. Parenting, for example, is largely a *praxis* activity: good parents help their children discover their own worthwhile lives by helping them acquire the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions or virtues to succeed in the various aspects of life. Parents discover the means and ends in context, in relationship. Indeed, the means are constitutive of the ends, that is, how we act as parents is enmeshed with our purposes as parents.

Parents, of course, share the responsibility for educating children with an entire society and, in particular, the specialists that society gives extraordinary authority and responsibility for educating children: teachers. Like parenting, teaching understood as *praxis* involves forming webs of relationship, but with more children and adults (albeit, of course, in lesser depth). While all may agree at a very abstract level about the ultimate aim—to help children lead good and worthwhile lives now and in the future—people often interpret the goal in very different ways, often glossed by slogans like doing “what is best for children.” Educational *praxis* cannot be determined in advance, but must be discovered in particular relationships, contexts, and situations.
Good Teaching as the Exercise of Judgment

Teaching and theoretical judgment

While we recognize both poiesis and praxis activities in the current Standards, we find no acknowledgement that distinctive forms of practice require different forms of judgment, with unique components. The goodness of a poiesis activity such as shipbuilding begins by determining the quality of the product or end—the finished vessel—and works backwards to decide the correct means, that is, the appropriate knowledge and skills that were employed to that end. Aristotle called this kind of judgment sophia or theoretical judgment and the Standards generally reflects this view of how to determine good teaching: student achievement results from good teaching. A chain of ends determining means that then become ends themselves begins: the end of student achievement is fostered by the means of good teaching, which, in turn, becomes the end accomplished by the means of teaching standards. Ironically, all begins by determining the end, a conception consistent with Aristotelian theoretical judgment and a model familiar to many via Covey’s advice in The seven habits of highly effective people (1989) to “begin with the end in mind.”

What is perhaps not so widespread is discussion of the components of theoretical judgment. Very briefly put: theoretical judgment involves the acquisition and application of certain forms of knowledge by people who model the requisite intellectual virtues in ways that demonstrate their own capacity to understand and reason appropriately. The particular forms of knowledge emphasized include generalizable or propositional knowledge (“knowing that”) and procedural knowledge (“knowing how”), as well as the intellectual virtues or talents needed to attain and apply that knowledge. An example of teaching understood as theoretical judgment includes efforts to identify and prescribe “best practice” regardless of context (e.g., Zemelman, Daniels & Hyde, 1993).

All these components are important concerns in the Standards. Standard 3, for example, specifies the acquisition of generalizable knowledge (e.g., “the core concepts and structures of the subject they teach”) and procedural knowledge (e.g.,
“access and communicate subject area knowledge to the curriculum”); the fostering of the intellectual virtue of curiosity; and the requirement that teachers link the general to particular contexts and audiences appropriately (“communicate effectively”). Standards 2-8 all involve the acquisition or application of knowledge: Standards 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 highlight generalizable knowledge (e.g., “demonstrate an understanding,” “have a broad knowledge base”); Standards 7 and 8 focus on procedural knowledge (e.g., “implement,” “apply”). Some of the intellectual virtues to be fostered include enthusiasm for learning and careful reflection (p. 15), a particular concern of Standard 10. In sum, much of The Standards seems consistent with a view of judging good teaching consistent with theoretical judgment, which is, in turn, linked to teaching practice understood as poiesis.

Teaching and practical judgment

But teaching is also praxis and Standards 1, 9, 10-13 reflect a view of teaching as ethical action. Teachers are expected to “value and care for all children,” “act as ethical educational leaders,” and demonstrate their responsibility to students, the public and the profession (Standards 1, 9, 11-13). Clearly knowing what to do is not enough; teachers have to act. The shift from knowing to acting, however, entails a change in the kind of judgment required: judging praxis involves phronesis or practical judgment, which involves doing the right thing at the right time for the right reasons with the right people (and thus its importance for teaching). Like theoretical judgment, practical judgment involves knowledge and virtue, but different kinds of knowing and different forms of virtue are emphasized.

Of special concern for practical judgment is knowing or perceiving the particular, that is, grasping the relevant features in a complex or rapidly changing environment (such as a classroom). Beginning teachers, for example, are often overwhelmed by the number and complexity of classroom interactions and often have difficulty perceiving much of what is happening; with experience they learn to read interactions better. Indeed, experienced teachers can often tell by the way a particular student stands or sits or her facial expression or the look in his eye that something needs attention (or not). One young teacher we know explains to her primary students that when she graduated from university she was given a third
eye in the back of her head to see what was going on behind her. Nussbaum (2001, 305) explains: “Practical insight is like perceiving in the sense that it is non-inferential, non-deductive; it is, centrally, the ability to recognize, acknowledge, respond to, pick out certain salient features of a complex situation.”

For teachers, practical insight involves significant knowledge of the learner which impacts all educational interactions including, for example, how a teacher should respond to the student who wrote the following poem:

A book
is a passageway to a
new world.
Make a box.
Sit inside of it and make it anything
you want.
Draw a picture
full of imagination
of art.
(Written by a student in 5th grade)[2]

Responding ethically requires knowing whether Sharyn, Gavin or Dean wrote the poem:

- Sharyn is a gifted writer who finds herself in literature. She reads voraciously (over 80 books so far this year) and excels in all her schoolwork. Her parents provide both encouragement and support; she is a good athlete, popular with her peers. The most significant problem she poses for her teachers is finding activities that challenge her. Lately, she has discovered e.e. cummings’ poetry and is starting to play with form in her writing.

- Gavin is a new student this year (this is his fourth school). Gavin is angry much of the time (especially on Monday mornings) and often creates problems on the playground. He gets into fights and seems to lose any sense of personal safety either for others or himself; he intimidates older, larger children with his temper. It has taken most of the year to get Gavin to look above any adult’s feet. He has a 2 inch-thick file in the office and his own group of specialists who check with him regularly. Generally unengaged with his schoolwork, Gavin is a gifted artist and this poem is his first attempt to connect visual and language arts.

- Dean is a student with special needs who does not meet grade expectations in any curriculum area—except writing poetry. He struggles to read the same books his peers read, but (with help) finds and reads other material. Dean finds the surface language requirements of prose puzzling, but freed of grammatical and spelling considerations, generates powerful, original work. The poem is his third draft; most revisions have focused on spelling and sentence structure.

Teaching understood simply as the application of standards (a form of theoretical judgment, that is, the application of the general to the particular) would result in the same feedback to each author. The poem, that is, the “outcome,” clearly exceeds the expectations for grade 5 students outlined in the BC Performance Standards for writing poetry: the poet uses clear, figurative language in conventional ways to develop some original ideas in poetic form. We contend that an ethical educational response would, however, involve different considerations if the poet were Sharyn, Gavin or Dean: Sharyn’s obvious ability, Gavin’s anger and Dean’s struggles would all be considerations in how the teacher responds. In making such a claim we are echoing Fenstermacher who explains:

Nearly everything that a teacher does while in contact with students carries moral weight. Every response to a question, every assignment handed out, every discussion on issues, every resolution of a dispute, every grade given to a student carries with it the moral character of the teacher (1990, p. 134)
Deciding what counts as moral character, that is, exercising the requisite moral virtues, in a pluralist, democratic society such as Canada is immensely complex. Canada’s many peoples and communities have distinctly different ideas about what counts as education, for example. An Anishinabe education, for example, would integrate bimaadziwin (or the good life) with particular concerns for traditional knowledge and spirituality (Toulouse, 2001). An Islamic education might focus on tawhid or oneness “where all aspects of life whether spiritual or temporal are consolidated into a harmonious whole” (Cook, 1999, p. 340). A Confucian education might emphasize respect for practical moral values (Pratt, Kelly & Wong, 1999).

These differing value structures can generate conflicts among different cultural frameworks, sometimes exacerbated by conflicts within frameworks. Egan (1997), for example, shows how dominant Western conceptions of education are based on contradictory ideas. We seek to integrate people into an existing community, while at the same time developing the capacities of the individual and helping them acquire the intellectual tools to critique the status quo.

Even a narrowing of values does not simplify teaching dramatically. The Standards focuses on the virtues of respect, justice and caring; however, exercising moral virtues, that is, acting wisely, is a fundamentally different activity from theorizing or applying knowledge. The relationship between ends and means, the general and the particular changes. People do not begin with the end in mind of demonstrating care or treating others with respect and then look for situations in which to demonstrate caring and respect. We find the need to act ethically within our concrete understanding of particular situations; we try to understand what is at stake for the people involved and attempt to act consistently with our interpretations and values. Rather than apply the general to the particular, we find the general within the particular: an ethical response to Sharyn, Gavin or Dean depends not only on the teacher’s expertise as a writing instructor, but the teacher’s capacity to discern the salient considerations and the teacher’s character and sensitivity.

Teachers exercising practical judgment must be willing to modify both their ends and means as they understand the particulars of the relationships and context. They need to be careful not to lose the richness and complexity of human relationships in efforts to act (by, for example, rushing to “uphold standards”). Indeed, “an education that embraces practical judgment prepares us to dwell within the rough ground of experience, to appreciate its complexity and deep interpretability and to respond ethically” (Phelan, 2001, p. 53).

Recommendations

image by Valerie Triggs

http://ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v11n03/articles/coult...
• Withdraw the current Standards document and commission a comprehensive review of the literature on good teaching and educational accountability.

The Standards for the Education, Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators in British Columbia begins by defining teaching as professional practice with requirements for both expertise and service that, in turn, reflects an understanding of teaching as both poiesis and praxis. In the development of standards for good teaching, however, the document relies exclusively on a conception of judgment consistent with poiesis (theoretical judgment), neglecting entirely the wealth of scholarship on praxis and practical judgment. We attach a brief annotated list of some of the scholars whose work on judging teaching might be consulted. The omission of these scholars from discussion about the Standards results in an impoverished and incoherent view of good teaching inconsistent with both educational scholarship and educational practice.

• Ensure that the final Standards document is used to foster debate and reflection about good teaching, rather than stating minimal requirements to be monitored.

We are concerned that the current version of the Standards will soon foreclose needed discussion about what counts as good teaching in a pluralist democratic society such as British Columbia. The history of the implementation of teaching standards in other jurisdictions leads us to believe that standards quickly become minimal requirements to be monitored rather than ideals for educational teaching. We sorely need professional and public dialogue about good teaching and the current document impedes this possibility.

Conclusion

We are disturbed by the limited and limiting conversation about teaching and accountability characteristic of the current version of the Standards. We believe that the College is in a unique position to open a better, more authentically democratic dialogue about good teaching and educational accountability and urge it to make that discussion one that is comprehensively and deeply informed. To that end, we urge the College to commission a comprehensive review that takes into account the enormous range of scholarship grappling with good teaching and educational accountability that the current document neglects.

We also urge the College to avoid the likely development of simplistic mandating and monitoring processes that limit the potential for discussion on what constitutes good teaching. We understand educational leadership as centrally concerned with beginning and sustaining educational dialogue and hope the College is willing to provide the educational leadership that all British Columbians deserve.

For Practical Judgement see also...

References


**Endnotes**

[1] For example, Habermas maintains the *poiesis-praxis* distinction in his separation of strategic action from communicative action; Arendt subdivides *poiesis* into labour and work and translates *praxis* as action.

[2] The poem and descriptions of the students are fictional, but grounded in our teaching experience.