Arguing for Teaching as a Practice: a Reply to Alasdair MacIntyre

JOSEPH DUNNE

This essay takes issue with Alasdair MacIntyre’s denial that teaching is a practice. It does so less by appeal to MacIntyre’s concept of practice than by criticism of his conception of teaching. It argues that this conception, as reconstructed from adversions to teaching in a range of his writings, does less than justice to what good teachers accomplish; and that, if this inadequacy is rectified—as much else in his writings suggests that it ought to be—there are clearer grounds for acknowledging teaching as a practice.

Disagreement arose in our dialogue on education when Alasdair MacIntyre claimed that ‘teaching itself is not a practice’. I countered by appealing to his own elaboration of practice in After Virtue to argue that, to the contrary, teaching is indeed a practice. After I had done so, he summed up our positions thus: ‘You say that teaching is itself a practice. I say that teachers are involved in a variety of practices and that teaching is an ingredient in any practice’. And he immediately went on: ‘perhaps the two claims amount to very much the same thing; but perhaps not’. What he then added strongly reinforced the ‘not’: ‘it is part of my claim that teaching is never more than a means, that it has no point and purpose except for the point and purpose of the activities to which it introduces students. All teaching is for the sake of something else and so teaching does not have its own goods’. But only a little later the concessionary note reappears when he refers to ‘the practice or practices of teaching’ and speaks relaxedly of achieving, ‘as with other practices’, ‘the ends of teaching’ (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, pp. 8–9).

I confess to some uncertainty myself as to how much is at stake in this disagreement. As I made clear in the dialogue, I do not contest MacIntyre’s claim that teaching is ‘put to the service of a variety of practices’. And does much hang on whether or not it is also to count as a practice in its own right? It can seem a hollow exercise to try to second-guess a philosopher of MacIntyre’s stature on the extension of a concept that he himself has made deservedly famous. And I have learned so much from his writings that I can hardly hope to mount any sustained argument against him that does not itself bear tokens of his influence. Despite these hesitations I shall argue in this paper that teaching is itself a practice. But
the argument will proceed less through analysis of the concept of practice
than through reflection on the realities of teaching. I shall try to show that
MacIntyre’s characterisation of the teacher’s role does less than justice to
what good teachers actually accomplish; it will follow that if this injustice
is rectified—as it can be, partly with the help of other things that he says—
there are clearer grounds for claiming that teaching is indeed a practice.

In the first section of the paper, reverting briefly to ‘practice’, I argue
that MacIntyre’s reasons for discounting teaching as a practice might
equally be adduced to disqualify another activity, architecture, that counts
for him as a paradigm example of a practice. And I go on to suggest that
construing teaching as merely ‘a set of skills and habits’ that are an
‘ingredient in any practice’ does not chime with a richer view of education
that he himself espouses both in the dialogue and in some other writings.
In the second section I attend specifically to his most recent book,
Dependent Rational Animals, arguing that its extended reflection on
‘acknowledged dependency’ as the context within which humans can
attain the only kind of independence truly available to them offers very
rich resources for understanding teaching—resources that are puzzlingly
under-exploited, however, in what he actually has to say about teaching in
that book. In the third section, I fasten on a conception of teaching and
learning that he takes from Aquinas and that, as I argue—partly by tracing
its genealogy back to Socrates—overlooks a good deal of what is involved
in teaching, especially when (as he and I agree) the subject matter of
teaching is particular practices. And in the final section, I draw attention
very briefly to a few salient features of the teacher’s role that seem to me
to be both neglected in his picture and integral to any understanding of the
kind of practice that teaching is. Throughout all of this it will, I hope, be
clear that my argument is not simply against MacIntyre. If the nub of this
argument is that he has a peculiar blind-spot for the richness of what
teaching entails, it is often by reference to his illuminating vision of very
much else that I can bring this imputed blind-spot into relief.

I

It is one of the interesting, though perhaps too little noticed, features of
MacIntyre’s concept of practice that it elides Aristotle’s distinction
between poiesis, where the end is separable from the activity, and praxis,
where the end lies in the very activity itself. Thus he recognises as
instances of practice what, in Aristotle’s categorisation, would count as
poiesis. Consider, for example, architecture, which he counts as a practice,
though—unlike dancing, music-making or virtuous action—its end lies
not in the activity of the craftsman or agent but in separate products
brought into being by this activity, buildings. Is what MacIntyre says
about teaching not equally applicable to architecture: that it ‘is never more
than a means’ and ‘is for the sake of something else’? Indeed, if one
prescinds from games (chess is a conspicuous example of practice in After
Virtue), whose essential nature as play is negated by any subordination to
other activities, is it not characteristic of the kind of activities that are
typically *poiesis* for Aristotle and practices for MacIntyre that each finds its place within a hierarchy of use? Thus we learn from the opening chapter of the *Ethics* that the tanner makes leather for the harness-maker, who in turn makes bridles for the cavalry; and it is the needs of the military craft, rather than those of his own, that determine the end of the harness-maker’s craft. Similarly, then, with respect to architecture: its end is indeed good buildings—but ‘good’ here is not specifiable solely by architects without reference to the goods of other practices. For, with respect to any particular building, it will matter whether it is, for example, a family home, an office, a cathedral or a football stadium; in each case it will have to serve the practice properly housed in that kind of building. Neither the fact of this service nor the considerable heterogeneity introduced into the work of architects through the variety of other practices in which it is thereby implicated makes us deny its status as a practice. And if serving the goods of a multiplicity of other practices does not disqualify architecture as a practice, I do not see a reason for judging that it *does* so disqualify teaching. In neither case, of course, does this service negate internal goods—which are, in the one case, well-designed buildings and everything in the activity of architects that contributes to them and, in the other, well-educated students and everything in the activity of teachers that contributes to making them so. To be sure, ‘contributes to’ will entail very different things in the two cases. But this is simply part of what differentiates architecture from teaching—and not any reason to deny that one of these activities is a practice.

I grant, with MacIntyre, that the end of education is ‘the development of the student’s powers’ and that these powers find their most reliable means of development through engagement with well-established practices—with their respective disciplines, standards and excellences—so that in teaching students one also necessarily teaches subjects. But part of what makes me want to recognise teaching as a ‘practice’ is a sense of the importance of a teacher’s care for the student as well as—and sometimes even independently of—his or her care for the subject. Some of a teacher’s skill will lie in understanding *which* subjects particular students have most aptitude or need for—and primary school teachers of course teach *several* subjects. This understanding, clearly, is not governed solely by the goods of particular subjects—any of which, on occasion, it may set aside in favour of the student’s greater good. And even within the teaching of a particular subject, good teachers are adept at finding appropriate learning aids (such as apt analogies or imaginative connections with previous knowledge) for *this* student at *this* stage of readiness; they are also constantly making particular judgements about when, for example, to push hard for mastery and when it is better to defer or deflect. A good practitioner of a particular discipline may or may not be gifted with perceptive care about the apprentice; but not to have this kind of care about the student would make one deficient precisely as a teacher. And this fact re-inforces the case for recognising teaching as a distinct practice, albeit one that—like architecture—is intimately bound up with the goods of other practices.
MacIntyre himself recognises the two distinct aspects of the teacher’s care for individual students to which I have just drawn attention. There is care exercised in advancing the student’s competence in a particular subject matter, which he acknowledges in our dialogue: ‘Children, as every teacher knows, differ in how long they take to get it right. So one great educational need is for there always to be enough time for teachers to attend to students individually’ (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 5). But there is also care for the student’s own good as something distinct from—though invariably it includes—disciplinary competence. MacIntyre recognises this when he writes in Dependent Rational Animals, that ‘[a]ll teaching requires some degree of care for the students qua students as well as for the subject-matter of the teaching’ (1999a, p. 89). And he develops the point in his essay on Aquinas in A. O. Rorty’s (ed.) Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives:

Educational progress thus involves two distinct types of good. There are the goods of skill and understanding at which each type of art and inquiry and the whole sequence of arts and inquiries aim. And there are the goods of individuals, who happen at particular times in their life to be students. . . . An education is a good education only insofar as the pursuit of the goods of the arts and of inquiry enable those individuals who engage in such activities to achieve their own goods (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 105).

Here MacIntyre endorses a view of education in which disciplinary accomplishments are not only distinct from but clearly subordinate to the student’s good—they are educationally valid only insofar as they promote the latter. And it is hard to see how this expansive view of education can be reconciled with a restricted conception of teaching as simply an ingredient in different practices—unless one severs any link between education and teaching, seeing responsibility for the student’s wider good as lying beyond the ken of a teacher who simply instructs within the parameters of a particular practice or discipline. If it is not to be left entirely to chance or to the student’s own best efforts, this wider good might then be seen as properly falling within the guardianship of parents or, as Aristotle might see it, as being shaped by the laws and customs that give to an entire society its characteristic ethos. Or, following the argument of After Virtue, one might hold that this wider good is unachievable without the unfolding of some coherent narrative in the student’s whole life, a narrative that is itself sustainable only within a well-ordered tradition, not least of moral practice and inquiry (it is here precisely that specific practices on their own are insufficient to constitute this good); and one might then add that, in the conditions of advanced modernity, these narrative and traditional resources are not reliably available to the teaching—or to any other—profession. As a great deal of his writing makes clear, MacIntyre is indeed inclined to this kind of cultural diagnosis—to speak, as we saw at the beginning of the dialogue, of the need ‘to stand against a current that will in fact probably overwhelm’ or of a mission that is ‘both essential and impossible’. But
even if this diagnosis is accurate (and I have a great deal of sympathy with it), it does not meet the present issue. For what it shows is the impossibility of education itself—whereas the present issue is to account for the discrepancy between the rich (and avowedly utopian) conception of education to which MacIntyre is clearly committed (and which his critique in any case presupposes) and what I claim to be his impoverished conception of teaching, that is to say of the role and function of persons entrusted with the task of intentionally furthering the education of others.

II

There is one notable exception in MacIntyre’s writings where he does not hold with this impoverished conception of teaching. In two central chapters of Dependent Rational Animals he offers a rich account of parenting (and in particular of mothering), treating it quite explicitly as an exercise in educative teaching. Adverting to the lamentable neglect of childhood in the mainstream philosophical tradition (he acknowledges Rousseau as a conspicuous exception), he draws on the work of D. W. Winnicott to provide an illuminating phenomenology of the parent–child relationship. Profiling the key developmental needs of the child in establishing a stable sense of self as a prerequisite of subsequent learning, he identifies the kind of care—embodied in quite specific attitudes and dispositions—that the parent-figure must provide if these needs are to be adequately met. The child’s primary neediness reduces it to a state of deep and unavoidable dependency: its most basic developmental need, then, is to experience a kind of dependability in its primary carers that allows it the experience of trust. Letting go in this trust enables it to play—to engage in forms of exploration that free it from the tyranny of urgently felt wants, while releasing and developing creative powers of body and mind through which it can test, sometimes destructively, the possibilities of its immediate environment and its own incipient agency—and thus to forge a sense of self. The child’s enabling trust is a function of the kind of security provided by the responsive carer. The relationship between them is deeply charged from the child’s side because the carer is the munificent source of desired satisfactions but also, and for this reason, the potential—and sometimes inevitably the actual—cause of painful frustration: attachment does not come without ambivalence and antagonism. It is a particular requirement of the good carer, then, that she be resilient and non-retaliatory in face of the child’s aggression, while providing the kind of responsive recognition, undistorted by her own needs, in which the child can come to recognise itself. This response is not governed by reciprocity: it is incumbent on the carer that she not treat the child proportionately to its accomplishments or to the benefits it can confer. And it is the peculiar calling of a parent to respond to this child and to do so unconditionally: come what may, I will be there for you. Indeed, the depth of the unconditionality that is normative for all parenting is only most manifest
in the case of parents of severely disabled children; no matter how
great the gap between normal parental hopes for health or endowment
and the child’s actual condition, the responsibility of loving care is
undiminished.

MacIntyre situates this analysis of the parent–child relationship within a
wider reflection on relationships of acknowledged dependency as both
goods in themselves and as necessary conditions for the achievement of
individual independence. He distinguishes and gives separate considera-
tion to these relationships insofar as they first develop and later sustain this
independence. And within those that develop it (that is to say those that
are educative) he makes a further sharp distinction between the parental
relationship that I have just outlined and subsequent relationships of
teaching and instruction which initiate the child into particular practices,
usually within the context of formal schooling. I believe that his
discussion of sustaining relationships—involving ‘common goods’, ‘net-
works of giving and receiving’, and the ‘virtues of acknowledged
dependency’ that they require—though problematic (see Dunne, 2002, pp.
352ff.), is a substantial contribution to ethical and political thought, and
that his discussion of what helps the child’s development towards
independence (which I have only inadequately summarised in the previous
paragraph) enhances our understanding of education and teaching in the
eyears, but that, disappointingly, his consideration of the intermediate
relationships does not make a comparable contribution to our under-
standing of education during the school years.

Along the trajectory of a person’s whole life, MacIntyre sees it as an
important part of a parent’s task to ‘bring the child to the point at which it
is educable by a variety of other different kinds of teacher . . . who have
the task of teaching children and young adults the elements of various
practices, something that involves not only the acquisition of skills, but
also the recognition of the good internal to each practice’. He goes on to
provide an account of ‘[t]hose qualities of mind and character that enable
someone both to recognise the relevant goods and to use the relevant
skills in achieving them’, characterising them as ‘the excellences that
distinguish or should distinguish teacher from apprentice or student’
(1999a, pp. 91–92). This account—which has characteristically acute
remarks on responsiveness, the limitation of rule-following and the nature
of self-knowledge—furthers MacIntyre’s analysis of human flourishing as
involving the development of three distinct though related capacities: to
evaluate one’s reasons for actions, to detach oneself from one’s immediate
desires and to imagine optimum (or at least rewarding and achievable)
pathways for future action. Interesting as it is, however, this generic
analysis hardly touches on the issue that, when introduced, it seemed
intended to illuminate: what is involved in ‘teaching . . . the elements of
various practices’. Two things, I believe, remain obscure: first, the
relationship between flourishing as the end of education and initiation into
various practices as the media through which this end is accomplished;
and, second, the nature of this initiation itself with respect to what it
demands of those entrusted to carry it out, that is to say, teachers.
The first of these issues, bearing on curriculum and its justification, is not my main concern here. But I want to point out briefly that it may indicate an important tension in MacIntyre’s thought between, on the one hand, the naturalistic account of flourishing that he offers in Dependent Rational Animals—where flourishing is understood as the fulfilment of its natural capacities by each species, including humans, and as grounding the ‘underlying unity’ in all our multifarious ascriptions of ‘good’—and, on the other hand, his earlier social-historical account of virtues and practices in After Virtue. (In After Virtue he had replaced Aristotle’s ‘biologically teleological’ account of virtue with a ‘socially teleological account’, that is to say, one that ‘does not depend on the identification of any teleology in nature’ (p. 183); but in Dependent Rational Animals he expressly reverses this earlier replacement, correcting his own earlier attempt to correct Aristotle: ‘I now judge that I was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible’ (p. x).) It is not clear how ‘flourishing’, conceived naturalistically, relates to the general structure of practices. But more especially, it is unclear how such a conception could be appealed to in justification of the highly specific set of practices (the staples, as he acknowledges, of a ‘liberal education’) that MacIntyre claims in the dialogue ‘every child should be taught’ (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 14).

The second issue, of more interest to me here, concerns the task of initiating students into practices—given that we have resolved issues concerning the selection and justification of the particular practices involved. In Dependent Rational Animals, MacIntyre tells us that ‘if we want to understand how it is good for humans to live, we need to know what it is to be excellent as an independent practical reasoner . . . But . . . [b]ecause of the part that others play in enabling us to move from the condition of infancy to that of an independent practical reasoner, we also need to know what it is for those others to perform their part excellently, what the virtues of caring and teaching are and how they relate to the virtues of the practical reasoner’ (p. 77, emphases added). It is good to find acknowledgement here that there are indeed virtues, distinct from the virtues exercised in mastery of any particular practice, that are specific to teaching. And this acknowledgement is repeated later: ‘Teachers in general . . . have to have in significant measure the habits that they try to inculcate. But they also need other virtues and what these are varies with the type of teaching that their role requires’ (p. 89, emphases added). As to what these other virtues are in the kind of teaching embodied in the parental role, MacIntyre gives us the rich account that I have already adumbrated. With respect to the virtues needed in the kind of teaching that mediates practices to students, however, his only point is that they are very different from the virtues of the good parent—just how different we are left to infer from the single example he wickedly puts before us: ‘there are kinds of teaching—the teaching of piano or violin, for example—in which the ruthless exclusion of the talentless from further teaching (a mercy to the student as well as to the teacher and to any innocent bystanders) is one of the marks of a good teacher and in which

the abilities to identify the talentless and to exclude them are among her or his virtues’ (p. 89).

III

Whereas I see his account of teaching as impoverished, MacIntyre, consistently with his own position, might see it rather as properly parsimonious. He does not, in fact—and perhaps for his own good reasons—have much to say about teaching. In our dialogue he describes it as the task of ‘communicating craft and knowledge to apprentices’ and maintains that ‘you cannot train teachers well, until they have been educated into whatever discipline it is that they are to transmit’ (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 5); as to what ‘communicating’ or ‘transmit’ might entail here or what might be important in attempts to ‘train’ teachers—once their competence in the disciplines they are to teach is established—he offers no account. But he might claim that little useful can be said about teaching as such—as distinct from teaching $x$, where $x$ is for example mathematics, history or physics and the meaningfulness of what is said is inseparable from the particular material and texture of $x$. Now, as I have already made clear in the dialogue and elsewhere (see Dunne, 1995), I agree with his emphasis on the substantive disciplines or practices that give content and form to education. Still, I believe that this emphasis need not exclude—and in fact, even for its own proper elaboration, requires to be complemented by—attention to generic conditions that must be satisfied if any instance of teaching-$x$ is also to qualify as an instance of teaching-as-educative. I have granted to MacIntyre a rich conception of education and have wanted to query only his conception of teaching. But it may in the end be impossible to sustain a truly rich account of education unless it includes—as, on my argument, his does not—a correspondingly rich view of teaching.

In fact MacIntyre does not entirely eschew generic comments about teaching, independently of some particular practice. I want now to examine a construal of the learning process and of the way in which teaching is related to it that he attributes to Aquinas and seems himself to endorse. Here is a passage from his article on Aquinas:

A student by exercising her or his powers develops those powers. A teacher may initiate learning, but a good teacher follows the same order in teaching that the student would follow, if making the relevant decisions for her- or himself (De Veritate, ix, 1). So students are taught in such a way that they can become independent practical and, later, theoretical reasoners. The teacher by introducing the students to this or that particular mode of practice or type of understanding, provides the occasion for the actualization of potentialities (1998, p. 102).

Or, again, from a different discussion of Aquinas in Whose Justice? Which Rationality?:

All education is in part self-education . . . Unsurprisingly in view of this ‘a teacher leads someone else to the knowledge of what was unknown in the same way that someone leads him or herself to the knowledge of what was unknown in the course of discovery’. The order of good teaching is the order in which someone would learn by and for him or herself (1988, p. 177).

These passages will be congenial to contemporary readers whose educational sympathies are against all forms of didacticism and in favour of ‘independent learning’, ‘student-centred approaches’, ‘learning by experience’ and ‘discovery methods’—though the philosophical sources of these sympathies are invariably taken to lie in Locke and Rousseau, whereas the sources of Aquinas’s view-point, embraced here by MacIntyre, lie of course in classical philosophy. Such readers will welcome the empowering import for students of the thorough subordination in the Aquinas/MacIntyre position of teaching to learning. Students are to become ‘independent . . . reasoners’ and there is no sense that, in helping them to do so, teachers transmit anything to them or cause anything in them. Rather, learning is the ‘actualisation of [students’ own] potentialities’ and teachers provide merely its ‘occasion’. Ideally, it seems, the student would not need such an occasion, but would rather learn ‘by and for him or herself’. But when, for whatever reason, this is not possible, and a teacher is necessary, it is still the unaided learner who provides the model: even if the teacher is now the decision-maker, she does best to make the same decisions and follow the same order that the student himself would have made and followed if he had been entirely without need of a teacher’s help.

If MacIntyre takes this view of teaching from Aquinas, for Aquinas himself it had strong antecedents in Aristotle as well as in Plato and Augustine. An important part of the Aristotelian background concerns the relationship of craft (techne, ars) and nature. As Aquinas puts this in the same work quoted by MacIntyre: ‘In those things brought about by nature and by craft, craft accomplishes the task in the same way and by the same means as nature. Craft imitates nature.’ He gives the example of health which may be in a person naturally or through the aid of the medic’s craft; but the successful medic does no more than co-operate with nature by removing obstacles that impede it from running its own course unaided. ‘So too’, Aquinas continues, ‘there are two ways of acquiring knowledge: one, when natural reason on its own comes to knowledge of the unknown and this way is called discovery learning (inventio); and the other when natural reason is aided by someone external and this way is called teaching (disciplina).’ And he then proceeds, in the passage quoted by MacIntyre, to make unaided learning by discovery, as a natural process, the model for the craft of teaching: ‘in teaching another, one leads him to knowledge of the unknown in the same way that someone leads himself to knowledge of the unknown by discovery learning’ (De Veritate, 11,1; translations mine).
The power through which ‘one leads oneself’ here is ‘natural reason’, a concept with Aristotelian roots in the ‘natural desire to know’ which is affirmed as a universal human endowment in the famous opening sentence of the *Metaphysics*, and in the ‘agent intellect’ which is analysed in the *De Anima* and identified in the *Ethics* as a divine spark in everyone. But there is also an Augustinian influence here with its own strongly Platonic background. In *The Teacher (De Magistro)*, Augustine attributes to all humans an inner light through which they reach understanding and grasp the truth; learning is an event internal to the learner and even when it occurs in response to an external ‘teacher’ the true teacher is this inner light itself:

When the teachers have explained by means of words all the disciplines they profess to teach . . . those who are called ‘students’ consider within themselves whether truths have been stated. They do so by looking upon the inner Truth, according to their abilities. That’s therefore the point at which they learn . . . Men are mistaken in calling persons ‘teachers’ who are not, which they do because generally there is no delay between the time of speaking and the time of knowing; and since they are quick to learn internally after the prompting of the lecturer they suppose that they have learned externally from the one who prompted them (p. 145).

For Augustine the most fundamental form of this prompting is questioning rather than telling or explaining. But even if the art of questioning shows the external teacher at his most resourceful, what Augustine still recognises as the essential condition and cause of learning resides in the student himself. Here he is following, though offering his own revision of, Socrates’ thesis in the *Meno* that there ‘is no such thing as teaching only recollection’ (81e), that is to say, the process of ‘recovering knowledge by oneself that is in oneself’ (85d). Socratic/Platonic ‘recollection’ finds a counterpart in Augustinian ‘illumination’. The metaphysical correlate of the former is the soul’s pre-existence in a realm of immediately intelligible realities, residual memory of which is retained as the essential precondition of learning. The corresponding, though different, correlate of the latter is the inwardness to the soul of God’s illuminating presence; one’s own inner light is in fact one’s receptivity to the indwelling divine light which should be acknowledged as the only true teacher.

It is an advantage of this canonical framing of the teaching task that the primacy it accords to the intrinsic endowment of the learner discountenances any kind of indoctrination or conditioning while at the same time it negates any notion of knowledge as transferable from one mind to another—as Socrates wryly remarks, ‘if only wisdom were like water which always flows from a full vessel into an empty one!’ (Symposium, 175d). It also provides (in terms of a theory of intellect and of different combinations of ‘act’ and ‘potency’ as accounting for different kinds of change) what might be called a transcendental grounding—an account of the conditions of possibility—of teaching and learning as specifically human endeavours. And it should also be said of Aquinas in particular—as
both inheritor of this whole tradition and MacIntyre’s avowed mentor—that he explicitly affirms, pace Augustine, that one can indeed teach another, while at the same time denying that one can properly be said to teach oneself (here he points to the inaptness of the medical analogy that he otherwise makes so much of; see De Ver. Q 11, a 2, ad 6). Moreover, albeit that the thrust of what I am calling his transcendental analysis in De Veritate leads him to claim that learning by one’s own discovery is ‘more perfect’ than being taught by another, he can still acknowledge an alternative perfection in the latter ‘because the teacher who explicitly has a total grasp of the knowledge can more expeditiously lead someone to it than that person can be led to it by himself insofar as he [the teacher] apprehends the sources of the knowledge in a certain community’ (ibid., ad 4).

I have just acknowledged the strength of the tradition on which Aquinas draws and gestured to the nuance and complexity of his own appropriation of it—even in his formal analysis of the teaching office, without reference to the qualification and enrichment that accrues to it from his other writings (see, for example, Summa Theologiae 1a, 117, 1 and 2). Still, there is something that can too easily be eclipsed in the subordination of teaching to learning that is so central to this tradition: the extent to which the teacher, too, is active—active, moreover, in ways that may not only call for a great deal of ingenuity on her part but may also matter greatly to the student—and not only in terms of the expeditiousness of how, but also of the meaning and resonance of what, he learns. The fact of this activity is already vividly recognised, behind Socrates’ ironic disavowal of the teacher’s role, by those on the receiving end of his maieutics: consider Meno’s expostulation that ‘you are exercising magic and witchcraft over me and positively laying me under your spell’, as he likens Socrates’ effect to that of the flat sting-ray (Meno, 80a), or Alcibiades’ no less exasperated outburst when he compares the effect of Socrates’ conversational style with the spell cast on his listeners by the flute-player, Marsyas: ‘the only difference between you and Marsyas is that you need no instruments; you do exactly what he does, but with words alone’ (Symposium, 215c–d). But of course this effect is also acknowledged by Socrates himself: ‘I infect them with the perplexity I feel myself’ (Meno, 80c). Moreover, Socratic perplexity is not mere exasperation: it is informed by the conviction of ‘one thing I am ready to fight for as long as I can in word and act: that is, that we shall be better, braver and more active men if we believe it right to search for what we don’t know than if we believe there is no point in searching because what we don’t know we can never discover’ (86b–c). Perplexity is a gain for the student, then, because it incorporates both an acknowledgement of ignorance and a desire to rectify it: ‘for now not only is he ignorant of it but he will be glad to search for it’. This rectifying search is arduous; in the language of the Republic it involves a ‘turning around’ and an ‘ascent’ of the soul. But in conducting it the student will not be alone: ‘I am ready to carry out, together with you, joint investigation and inquiry into what it is’ (Meno, 80a–d). This togetherness can certainly be seen as a kind of psychological
support and encouragement—as providing the student with motivation for an endeavour for which he has in any case a native ability and propensity. But in fact its effect is also more intrinsic. And this is the whole point of the Socratic/Platonic espousal of dialogue as the favoured mode of inquiry: something can be accomplished together that neither party could accomplish alone—a truth well captured in the image of the two fire-sticks which, only by being brought into contact with each other, can produce the illuminating spark (Republic, 435a).

If in any philosophical consideration of teaching it is hard to avoid the figure of Socrates, I have wanted to show how active and substantial is his role as a teacher—his own disclaimers, linked to the rhetoric of recollection, notwithstanding. But perhaps it is too easy to valorise Socrates without sufficiently adverting to the particularity of his practice (or indeed to how undialogical—how relentlessly one-way, even bludgeoning—his line of questioning can be!). I believe that some version of this practice should have a continuing role in education—even, as work I have been involved in for many years with primary teachers amply confirms, in the education of young children (see Dunne, 1998). Still, it is a practice of reflection on non-disciplinary concepts, that is to say concepts—such as friendship or justice—that, without any specialised learning, are already part of the stock-in-trade of his interlocutors. And, as such, it does not provide a model for the whole of education. For much of what teachers have to do is to introduce students to, and to help establish their competence in dealing with, conceptual schemes and modes of thinking, feeling and doing that they could scarcely master—and might never even meet—outside their role as students. Here it is less the language of discovery or leading forth than that of apprenticeship or ‘assisted performance’ that seems most apt. And although this language is more recognisably Vygotskian it is still peculiarly at home with MacIntyre’s concept of practice. For every practice has its own specific texture and density, that has developed over the course of its history and is available now only to those who are its genuine practitioners, that is to say, those who have entered into and made their own its characteristic activities (e.g. modes of inquiring, conducting experiments, assembling evidence), and made themselves answerable to its particular standards and demands. And it is hard to see how anyone could get far in any practice outside the context of some more or less systematic engagement with persons who have already become practitioners (this indeed might be taken to be the point of Aquinas’s phrase, ‘in a certain community’ that I highlighted earlier).

I am suggesting that MacIntyre’s understanding of a school subject as a practice sits uneasily with the conception of teaching which, as we saw at the beginning of this section, he derives from Aquinas (and I have traced back to Socrates). In that conception the teacher ‘provides the occasion for the actualisation of potentialities’ and the ‘order of good teaching is the order in which someone would learn by and for himself’. What MacIntyre says here seems too close to the view criticised recently by Raimond Gaita: ‘Teachers . . . do for their students what autodidacts do for
themselves’ (Gaita, 2000, p. 230). He seems to imagine a kind of self-sufficiency in the pupil that both reduces the role of the teacher and is out of kilter not only with his notion of practice but with his broader understanding of the role of others in the formation and constitution of the self. Few philosophers have insisted so powerfully on the inherently social and intersubjective nature of all human activity, and perhaps especially of thinking. Here is just one of very many characteristic passages from his writing: ‘We learn to think better or worse from others, much that is matter for our thought is presented to us by others, and we find ourselves contributing to a complex history of thought in which our debts to our predecessors are payable only to our successors . . . This kind of relationship to others is an essential and not an accidental characteristic of thought’ (MacIntyre, 1999d, p. 249). MacIntyre of course also stresses the need for independent thinking—the fact that one has not learned to think at all unless one has learned to think for oneself. But could it be that in his understanding of teaching specifically he allows this latter point to overshadow the point about interdependence that is otherwise so prominent in his thought? Gaita points out that, even when, beyond a merely instrumental view of education, one appreciates the ‘intrinsic worth’ of different subjects one may still do so ‘in ways which leave a teacher accidental to the discovery of such worth, in ways which make it accidental that there are teachers at all’ (p. 233). While it would be too much to attribute such a thought to MacIntyre, he has not done enough, in my view, to show what is essential in the educative task or how the teacher contributes essentially to the pupils’ learning.

IV

There is much in the character of teaching to deter one from any attempt to specify its essence—not least the ‘difference’ imported into it by the vast range of subjects or practices that may supply its content, the huge diversity of levels, from pre-school to post-graduate, at which it may be practised, and the disconcerting heterogeneity—in terms of ability, interest and cultural background—of the students whom it addresses. There is the fact, too, that it is ‘life’ that educates us all—or the ‘world’ or ‘society’ or ‘history’—so that formal schooling can seem too sterile, too inflexibly role-bound, to be allowed any exclusive mandate on teaching and education. Still, when I envisage teaching as a practice I am confining it to the intentional, more or less systematic and institutionalised, attempt significantly to aid and enhance the learning of others committed to one for this purpose; I am referring to ‘teachers’ in the ordinary sense of this word, those who labour in class-halls, seminar-rooms, gyms or studios, and for whom this labour constitutes their chief craft, profession or vocation. While this reference is immensely wide and varied, there are some cases of instruction that I would exclude from it. When I first went for typing lessons or submitted myself to a driving instructor, I learned skills whose usefulness has made a big impact on my way of life. Why
then do I want to discount these examples as cases of educative teaching? Not of course because the skills involved are manual ones or because of their manifest usefulness; it is rather because I was in a position to commission the teaching, to know in advance what to expect from it and to deploy its results within an already established set of priorities. It is part of the practice of teaching that teachers cannot assume that their students already are interested in or can see the point of what they have to teach them. MacIntyre suggests that ‘it is the mark of someone who is ready to leave school’ that they no longer ask about their academic disciplines ‘But what use are they to us after we leave school?’ (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 5). But it is no less the mark of those with whom teachers mainly have to deal that they do raise this question, while not yet perhaps having the means either of answering it or seeing that it is the wrong kind of question to ask. It is only in and through the teaching, when it is successful, that students get sufficiently on the inside of different practices and disciplines to learn what it is they have to give. It is part of education that it creates the conditions of its own justification. And it does so, of course, only because undergoing it is more or less transformative.

It is right to emphasise (as MacIntyre does by apt reference to Matthew Arnold) that this transformation takes place as the possibilities and demands of a practice elicit and shape the students’ own developing powers. What exclusive emphasis on the structure of the practice neglects, however, is the countless number of ways in which students may be distant from, resistant to, or at sea with, what it has to offer—and the perhaps no less numerous ways, direct and indirect, by which they may be brought towards it. It is not just that students may not ‘get it right’ but that they may not be engaged by the material at all or may have their relationship to it refracted through varying intensities of interest, dreaminess, apathy or antagonism; and what the teacher has to confront is not only the emotional-imaginative tonality of the whole class but different ways in which this may influence and be influenced by the shifting moods of many diverse individual students. What needs to be captured here is the complexity of the teaching situation, the fluctuating forces at work in it, and hence the dynamic character of what it puts in play between teacher and students. There is always something at stake for the teacher and the students, so that success—defined largely by the goods of the subject but conditioned by the complexities of the situation—is never guaranteed. Haunted by the ever-present possibility of failure, the teacher succeeds only when her activity has the character of an event through which students’ attention and energy are drawn into and focused by the open possibilities of the subject-matter, so that insights are gleaned, competencies are developed and satisfactions in achievement quicken further interest. This event-like character is something close to what Hannah Arendt sees as the natality of action: its capacity to bring forth what could not have been reliably predicted, so that agents are realised and disclosed to themselves and to each other in new ways. Related to event is story. If MacIntyre is right to claim that telling stories should have a large place in teaching, the perhaps more basic point is that teaching a class (for,
say, a school year) *is* an *enacted* story. Incidents and episodes cumulate into an unfolding storyline which further incidents and episodes sustain, disrupt or redirect. Teacher and students become characters who contribute to and are constructed by this storyline, their actions ensuring that its tensions find creative resolution or settle into stalemate. And it is for this reason that research into teaching is best served by narrative modes of inquiry: to understand a teacher’s practice (on her own part or on the part of an observer) is to find an illuminating story (or stories) to tell of what she has been involved in with her students.

Teaching must have this open-ended character that belongs to event and story while at the same time it has definable ends towards which a teacher knows that she must try to steer her course. When Paulo Freire (1972) says that education is suffering from ‘narration-sickness’ or Roland Tharp and Ronald Gallimore (1991) lament the frequent recourse in schooling to a ‘recitative script’ whereby teachers ‘instruct and assess’ while students ‘absorb and regurgitate’, they are criticising forms of pedagogy in which it is supposed that ends can be achieved without events being hazarded or undergone—or that there is no story yet to be enacted since the teacher already has a story to tell. But, equally, it is not in order to annul its proper ends that one stresses the eventful character of teaching; rather, eventfulness is unavoidable precisely *because of the kind of ends* to which teaching is committed. ‘Much learning’, according to a Buddhist saying, ‘is like a poor man counting someone else’s coins’. It is just because this kind of learning is *not* an adequate end of education—just because students must *themselves* be significantly changed—that the teacher cannot avoid eventful action and the rewards and perils it puts at stake.

Just *how much* to put at stake, and *when*, is a question that teachers face all the time—as MacIntyre himself acknowledges in his comment on truths that may jeopardise students’ present sense of identity: it ‘is important not to go too far too fast . . . not to force on students questions that they may not yet be able to face’ (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002 p. 13). Finding the mean, as one might put it in Aristotelian terms, is something that teachers have to do constantly and in many different respects. For example, a teacher must care for each student—but differently, as MacIntyre rightly stresses, from how parents care for their children. Honouring this difference entails resisting, too, much in the therapeutic culture that is now so easily naturalised into teaching—though canvassing ‘ruthless exclusion of the talentless’ as an element in a teacher’s repertoire overdoes the resistance as well as ignoring the lot of many teachers whose greatest challenge is precisely to find ways of *including* the ‘talentless’. Allied to therapeutic concerns (e.g. with students’ ‘self-esteem’) are longer established pre-occupations with method, especially effective techniques for motivating students and managing the classroom. Much of this is both pretentious and distracting: pretentious because of the glamour which it anxiously borrows from behavioural research, distracting because it is so easily indifferent to the integrity of what is to be taught. Against this kind of colonisation of teaching, it is right to insist, with MacIntyre, that one cannot for example seriously teach history unless one has taken
some care to become an historian. And yet this emphasis on the ‘sovereignty of content’ too easily underestimates the gap between necessary and sufficient conditions—as if being a good historian were enough in itself to make one a good teacher. MacIntyre’s denial that teaching is a practice is of a piece, I believe, with this underestimation. What makes teaching a distinct practice—and, one might say, a high art—is neither subject-matter expertise per se, nor solicitous caring, still less methodological sophistication. Good teaching resides, rather, in care for students that is realised in helping them to become what particular practices can enable them to become (which, as Simone Weil (1959) well recognised, may far surpass proficiencies specific to these disciplines), all the pedagogical judgement and skill often vainly sought from ‘method’ finding expression in this care and helping. And what good teaching especially aims at is the kind of enablement in one practice that can bear on other practices, so that through all of them students acquire intellectual and moral virtues that are goods in their own lives and in those of their friends and communities.

The need for responsiveness to so many different kinds of demands brings teaching close to what I have elsewhere called technai of the kairos: activities where opportunism, timing and improvisation are critical (Dunne, 1993, pp. 253–261). There is a protean quality to teaching which invites a diversity of metaphors and can encompass talents variously akin to those of gardener, shepherd, hunter, magician, choreographer and lover. On different occasions and as realised in different teachers, such apparently contrary qualities as impassioned enthusiasm and quiet empathy may enter into fine teaching. One teacher in full flow, possessed by the cadences of a piece of literature or by the beauty of an experiment, may be as commendable as another whose unobtrusive facilitation ensures that a group of students gain much from interaction and discussion with each other. One teacher may inspire identification and emulation by modelling various skills or dispositions for the students, while another may resolutely refuse to be exemplary, so that students are confronted with or encouraged to venture some expression of their own relative incompetence. There is wisdom in Martin Buber’s emphasis on ingenuity in the teacher, a kind of concentrated directness which can be damaged by reflection (Buber, 1969)—but perhaps this wisdom can coexist with the knowingsness of Kierkegaard’s ‘indirect communication’ or his claim that ‘it is only . . . by deceiving him that it is possible to bring into the truth one who is in illusion’ (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 40). Nor need an emphasis, such as Buber’s, on the ascetical character of teaching—its being about responsiveness to the students’ needs rather than gratification of one’s own needs—cancel the fact that teaching brings its own fulfils and that despite the asymmetrical nature of one’s relationship with them one can learn from and be enlivened by one’s students.

Many different kinds of comportment then may be observed in different teachers or, on different occasions, in the same teacher; still, none of these comportments must enter into teaching—or rather any of them can easily become so exaggerated or exclusive as to detract from what teachers
accomplish. This fact may seem to make teaching *too* protean to count as a practice. But it rather makes true of teaching what Aristotle says of virtue: that one gets it right only against the background of countless ways of getting it wrong. Or as Gaita well puts it, ‘The power of fine teaching is delicately nuanced through its disciplined perception of its many possible corruptions’ (Gaita, 2000, pp. 231–232). This ‘disciplined perception’ is permeated of course by a sense of the good or goods of educative teaching. I have no quarrel with MacIntyre when he suggests that philosophy of education is better conceived as part of philosophy than as a separate sub-discipline. I believe it is unfortunate, however, that this commitment to the integrity of philosophy is not matched by a similar commitment to the integrity of teaching: ‘teaching does not have its own goods. The life of a teacher is therefore not a specific kind of life. The life of a teacher of mathematics, whose goods are the goods of mathematics, is one thing; a life of a teacher of music whose goods are the goods of music is another’ (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 9). As I have argued here, the good of teaching does not exclude the diverse goods of different subjects but it also includes *the good of helping others to share in them*—at its height by coming to love each for what it is in itself and for what, with others, it can contribute to that love of truth, goodness and beauty which animates a sense of responsibility for one’s own life and for that of one’s community. One might be very deeply immersed in the goods of subjects such as music or mathematics while having little if any sense of what is involved in helping others in this way to make them their own. This sense is shared by teachers of many different subjects—even, though perhaps now all too rarely, in universities where it is threatened by the primacy increasingly accorded to research productivity (for reflection on a noteworthy counter-example, see Dunne, 2000). And it is a sense that entitles them to understand themselves and to be understood by others as sharing in a common practice.1

**Correspondence:** Joseph Dunne, Education Department, St. Patrick’s College, Dublin 9, Ireland
Email: joe.dunne@spd.dcu.ie

**NOTE**

1. In writing this essay, I have benefited greatly from conversations with my friends John Doyle and Fergal O’Connor OP.