

TEACHING AND TRANSFORMATION

Bernie Neville

I want to start by asking you to reflect on your purposes as educators. What do you think you are doing as educators? What do you hope to do?

Perhaps you start with the notion that you know something worth knowing, and aim to pass on this knowledge to your clients/students so that they can have more power or pleasure in their lives.

You may believe you possess certain skills which it would be good for other people to possess, and you may set out to train your students in these.

There may be certain attitudes and values which are important to you, and you may set out to encourage these attitudes and values in your students.

You may see your work in social and political terms. You may be convinced that a just and equitable Australian society depends on the provision and maintenance of universal literacy. You may be concerned at the potential for oppression, exploitation and fragmentation in a society where all do not have the same access to the means of communication or the skills of the workplace. You believe it is good for Australian society to have all its citizens literate or numerate or skilful or knowledgeable. So you teach your students not simply for their sakes as individuals, but for the sake of us all.

Perhaps you are very conscious of the beauty of language or the thrill of science and the pleasure that your own ability to read and write and calculate and analyse has brought you and brings you still, and you want to share this pleasure with others.

On the other hand, your approach to teaching may be shaped by the satisfactions you have found in helping your students to find their own way. Perhaps you have found that it is not the attainment of knowledge which matters in the long run, but the emergence of the person and the opening up to the world that occasionally occurs, which fills you with excitement and makes the task worth doing.

Perhaps you think about education the way Australian politicians of all parties seem to think about it - that the only justification for any sort of education is its economic value. It is only worth doing if it makes or saves money. Perhaps you devote yourself to education as a contribution to the Australian economy! I fancy that this is actually the least likely of the scenarios listed here, but we must acknowledge that in the present political climate it remains the official one.

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Perhaps your purposes and practices as an educator are not included in the ones I have listed here. However, whatever they are, I want to suggest some particular ways of thinking about them.

I suggest first of all that one useful way of looking at learning is to distinguish between learning as *imitation* and learning as *individuation*. On the one hand we have a tendency to want to become like other people, to learn by copying them. At the same time we want to be ourselves, to be individuals, to grow in our own way.

Though we do not usually put it this way, most of us educators are basically interested in making other people more like us. We have some knowledge, some skills, some attitudes, some values, and we think it would be a good idea if our students had some of the same knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. As educators we are often faced with students who are obviously ignorant in areas which we and they think are important, students who lack important skills. Sometimes they have values and attitudes which hinder their attempts to overcome their difficulties.. So we make it our task to change them, to make them a little more like us, for it is difficult to give them knowledge and skills we don't have ourselves, and we certainly are not interested in helping them develop values and attitudes which we don't approve of. On the other hand, when we have a student who already has knowledge, skills, values and attitudes which we think are desirable, we don't try to change them, but rather confirm them in what they are.

Some teachers are perfectly happy with the idea of teaching people to be like them. Others find the idea uncomfortable. In either case they can't help engaging in it. Even when we are committed to the notion of helping students to find their own ideas and attitudes instead of uncritically accepting ours, when we see ourselves as facilitators rather than instructors, we are still wanting them to share this particular skill (critical thinking) and value (the acknowledgment of people's right to be themselves) which are important to us. We are still, paradoxically, trying to make them a little more like us.

Most education is imitative like this. As a matter of fact, this is what I am doing right now, inviting you to think about education the way I do, to share some of my information, some of my ideas, some of my approaches to the task. I am trying to make you a little more like me.

However, that is only one aspect of what is going on here. There is another aspect to the teaching-learning interaction between you and me that is just as important.

While I am busy telling you things that I think are important, you are busy sorting and selecting what I tell you. Some of it you may accept as being obviously true; you know it already. Some of it you may put on hold; you need to reflect on it a bit more before you decide whether to accept it. Some of it you may immediately reject as rubbish. Some of it you may filter or distort, so that what you hear and accept is different from what I think I am saying. Any tendency you may

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have to become more like me is impeded, or at least strongly influenced, by your tendency to become more like yourself. Learning as *imitation* has to contend with learning as *individuation*.

I admit that *individuation* is an awkward and ugly word, but I can't find a better one to express what I mean. I need a word that means our tendency to become ourselves, rather than to copy something else. There are other words which express something of the same idea, e.g. *self-actualisation*, *self-realisation*, *self-emergence*, even *growth*, but they seem even less satisfactory. The tendency I am talking about has two distinct dynamics. The first is to protect or defend ourselves, to survive. The second is to enhance or improve ourselves, to grow. These are different aspects of being and becoming ourselves in our individual, personal way.

This tendency to survive and grow, to fully become the person that we potentially are, is sometimes compatible with our tendency to copy others, and sometimes not.

We don't have to invent everything for ourselves. We are glad to have the knowledge and skills which others can give us. We don't have to solve every problem from scratch when others can show us how to do it. But even when we choose to copy others, our tendency to grow in our own way may ensure that we personalise that knowledge, that we possess that new knowledge in our own particular way, and practise that new skill in our own particular style. Copying others helps us grow in our own way.

On the other hand, individuation and imitation are sometimes incompatible, and we have to choose. When the things that others are showing and telling us do not fit in with who we are and who we want to be we can insist on going our own way, and refuse to learn from them. When our students are refusing to learn what we want to teach them, it may be frustrating for us. From their point of view, however, it is entirely reasonable. What we are teaching them may threaten their present understandings, their value system, perhaps their notion of who they are. Under this sort of threat they naturally choose to survive as they are, by rejecting or ignoring what we are trying to teach them.

There is another distinction between two kinds of learning which I think is worth making here. It is the distinction between *incremental* learning and *transformative* learning.

Incremental learning is learning which is simply added on to what we already know. You teach your students to recognise words they could not previously recognise; you teach them to do calculations they could not do before, You give them information which is new to them, you teach them to express their ideas and feelings in the written word. They now have more knowledge and skills than they had before, but they need not have changed as people. They have certainly changed, but the change is in the quantity of their knowledge and skills, rather than in the quality.

By contrast, transformative learning is learning which changes someone significantly. One of the students in your English class assumes and states that violence is a legitimate way to solve

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disputes in marriage. You don't feel able to take a neutral position in such a matter, so you challenge the assumption and point out that such violence is both immoral and illegal. This is not just a piece of add-on knowledge. Learning it requires a substantial change in the way such a person understands the world. They cannot accept what you are saying without giving up something they "know" already. It means a change in the quality of their knowledge, not just a change in the quantity. It means a change in the kind of person they are. However, no matter how desirable such a change may be, and no matter how strongly you put your argument, your student is actually not likely to experience such a change on the basis of what you say.

I suggest that in the kind of work you are engaged in, you are often inviting your students to such transformation. You are trying to teach knowledge and skills which conflict with what they already "know" about themselves. You are engaged in changing people. You are engaged in shifting them from a sense of themselves as illiterate, ignorant or bored to a sense of themselves as literate, knowing or engaged. Not surprisingly, you sometimes find this difficult. And it is difficult because you are not just "adding on" something to what is already known. When you are trying to teach someone something significant, as you often are, you must often deal with the fact that what you teach must connect with, and often conflict with, what is "known" already. Learning, if learning occurs, is not just add-on but transformative.

You may find it useful to think of your students' knowledge as layered. Imagine it to be something like an onion.

There is a surface layer of skills and behaviours, the ways your students behave, the things they have learned to do and say, for better or worse. You can see what these are by observing them.

Below this there is a layer of information, ideas and beliefs. The things they know and think. You can find out about these by asking them.

Below this again, there are values and attitudes. These are somewhat harder to get at, but if people reflect they can usually become aware of what they value, of how they judge that something is good or bad, right or wrong, nice or nasty, important or unimportant, and it is possible for you to help them do this and to see the implications of these values for their behaviour.

There is a deeper layer still, a layer of basic convictions and assumptions, the things people take completely for granted. Central to these are their basic assumptions about identity, about who they are. These are often difficult to get at, simply because they are taken so completely for granted and rarely reflected on.

So, how does this structure of knowledge change through teaching?

Firstly, it seems that it is the lower levels that control the whole structure. Each layer expresses the layer below it. We make certain unreflected assumptions about who we are and what the

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world is like; these assumptions are reflected in our value systems, in our tendency to see some things as better and more important than others; these values are expressed in our beliefs, ideas and opinions, the thoughts we have about the world; finally, our thoughts and opinions find expression in the things we do and say. The surface layers can change to some extent (we learn some things and forget others) without affecting the deeper layers. On the other hand, change in the deeper layers generates change all the way through.

Secondly, it seems that while the surface layers can change readily enough as long as the deeper layers are not affected, learning which involves change in the deeper levels is strongly resisted. If a student can add on a new skill or a new bit of information without any change in his or her values, attitudes and assumptions, learning is pretty straightforward. On the other hand, if taking on this new skill or accepting this new information requires a change in values and attitudes, the student will resist the new knowledge. We hang on very tightly to our values and assumptions, especially to our assumptions about ourselves. We might even argue that when people change, it is usually in order to remain the same. If we are forced to change the things we do and say (for example, by our employer) we look for ways of changing which leave our values, our assumptions and our sense of who we are unaffected.

One thing that teachers get used to is the way some students resist learning. They have seen themselves for so long as people who can't or won't do certain things that, even when they have come to a class and asked to be taught, even when they declare that they want to learn, they still keep resisting the teaching. For some one who is illiterate, for instance, learning to read and write is actually threatening, because it would destroy their idea of who they are. They don't yet know any other way to be. You will probably come across children or adolescents whose public identity is bound up in being the one who gives teachers a hard time, or the one who does not learn. Giving up one's identity, even an uncomfortable identity, is frightening.

Some of your students have basically the same values and make basically the same assumptions as you do, and teaching them presents no problem. Learning what you want to teach them poses no threat to them. The knowledge and skills you teach them can confirm them in who they are and enrich their understanding and behaviour. You are dealing with incremental skills and knowledge which do not threaten the deeper levels. They do not have to reorganise their whole view of themselves and their world in order to take in this new knowledge. They just add it on.

On the other hand, what can you do for some one who refuses to accept the information and skills you are offering? Their basic convictions about themselves and the world may be threatened by the knowledge you are presenting.

I believe that it is possible to change deeply held values and assumptions. Your presentation of the new information may be so persuasive, and their practice of the new skills may be so satisfying, that they can let go of their old values and assumptions about themselves and take on new ones. They may actually completely reorganise their view of themselves and their

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world. People do change, and change deeply. Sometimes this transformation comes through suffering a traumatic experience, and the change may be for better or for worse. And sometimes this transformation comes through education.

The educational exercise we call *training* focuses on the surface layer, giving people skills. Generally this is regarded as simply incremental learning; it simply adds to the number of things a person can do. Yet often it involves much more. Sometimes, learning a skill involves me in changing my idea of what I am and what I can do. Sometimes, I cannot learn the skill unless I make these changes.

The educational exercise we call *instruction* aims at the second layer, giving people information. Generally the instructor believes that he or she is adding this information on to what people know already. But this too may involve much more. It may involve re-organising one's whole structure of knowledge to accommodate the new information.

There is more to education than adding on information and skills to what is already known. The things we know and feel about the world are not just a collection of disconnected fragments. They are all connected in a complex structure. Certainly we can sometimes tack new pieces of knowledge onto this structure. Often, however, we cannot take on a new bit of knowing without re-organising the whole thing. The skilful trainer and instructor know that learning a skill, or gaining new knowledge, sometimes involve unlearning what we already know, changing the way we think about ourselves, changing our attitudes, becoming aware of our assumptions about who we are and what we can do, and changing these accordingly. It involves a change in the structure of what we know (including what we know about ourselves).

If we are interested in an education which makes a difference to people, an education which has an enduring effect, we must take into account the deeper layers of the onion.

Training is a good way to teach skills and *instruction* is a good way to impart information, but neither of them are particularly good ways of teaching values or changing attitudes. In fact, telling people what values and attitudes they ought to have is often counter-productive. Attacking people's deeply held convictions is generally a good way to strengthen them. Attempting to change what some one knows at the surface layers does not cause much upset. Disturbing their sense of who they are rouses a great deal of anxiety, and they often deal with this anxiety by defending themselves against this knowledge. When our sense of who we are is under threat we are inclined to opt for survival rather than risk it all for growth.

Fortunately, training and instruction are not the only forms of teaching. We also teach by *modelling*, by showing our students how to behave. In your teaching you do this explicitly by demonstrating a particular skill you want them to learn. More importantly, you constantly model attitudes and values and ways of relating which they may "pick up" without being terribly aware that they are doing so. I suggest that this is the way we have all "picked up" most

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of what we take for granted in our values and attitudes. And it is still the way your students learn many of the significant things they learn from you.

We can teach also by *telling stories*. There are many kinds of stories we can tell, and many ways we can tell them. Perhaps the most useful stories in the teaching context are stories about how other students have learned. The attitudes and values embedded in a story are "picked up" without the need for teasing out lessons or morals. Stories act on us on the imaginal level, and we can learn from them, as we did when we were children, without being terribly clear about what we have learned.

We also teach through *experience*. Most of what we know we have learned by observing life and participating in it, without any need for teachers to tell us what to think about it. Skilful teachers use their students' capacity to learn naturally from experience. They bring experience into the classroom, where they can help their students reflect on it. In experiential learning, values and assumptions may be changed the way they were learned in the first place, by being engaged in life, reflecting on it, and discovering what "works".

We also teach by *coaching*, which combines the demonstration and rehearsing of skills, instruction on principles, reflection on experience and feedback on attainment. Effective coaching functions through an interaction between coach and student which is continually shaped to meet the needs of the particular student. (This is different from *training*, where all the class are supposed to learn the same skills at the same rate.)

We can teach by *facilitation*, by giving people the opportunity and the resources to learn what they need to learn, instead of setting out to teach them some particular thing which we happen to think is important. The facilitator focuses on providing the resources for learning, providing a suitable environment for learning, providing support for learning, and trusting each student to learn whatever is most appropriate for her or him at the present moment. Facilitation aims at encouraging learning as *individuation* rather than as *imitation*; it aims at removing or minimising obstacles to learning on the assumption that if people are really free to learn whatever is there to be learned, they will learn whatever they most need to know. And if they decide not to learn at all, it is their responsibility and not the teacher's.

We can teach also by engaging in a *collaborative exploration* with our students. If we abandon the notion that we are the ones who know, and our students are the ones who are ignorant, great possibilities for learning open up for us. We can join with our students in a dialogue in which we and they are teachers and they and we are learners. We don't have to deny what we know. We have our particular contribution to make to the group's learning, just as each of our students has a particular contribution to make. We are confident that if we are all honest and humble about what we know and curious about what we don't know, and if we all take responsibility for what happens, learning will be exciting, significant and empowering.

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I don't pretend that this is a complete list of ways of teaching. I simply want to illustrate the notion that there are different ways of teaching and that different ways of teaching have different purposes and effects. There are some kinds of information which are effectively learned by rote, though this is now a very unfashionable way of teaching. There are other things that cannot be learned by rote, or even by instruction or training. If you are really interested in transformative learning, if you want your classes to make a difference to people, you need to sometimes work at the *story-telling, experiential, facilitation, exploration* end of this list. (You will be modelling anyway, for better or for worse.)

If you accept my suggestion that education often involves transformation, you need to keep yourselves aware that transformation rarely takes place in situations of threat. People under threat learn (if they learn at all) in order to survive, not in order to change. You need to acknowledge that resisting your teaching about (say) violence or racism is perfectly reasonable behaviour on the part of students whose violent or racist values and assumptions (and sense of who they are) are being threatened (or who think their values and assumptions are going to be threatened). If the content of your teaching is indeed threatening to particular students, you need to make the context of your teaching as supportive as possible - giving serious attention to building good teacher-student and student-student relationships, accepting your students as they are without judging them, listening with real attention to what they say and taking it seriously. I believe that personal change almost always takes place in the context of a relationship, and the better the quality of the relationships in your class (including the quality of your relationship with each student) the more open your students will be to changing the quality of their knowing, and not just the quantity of their information. Note that I am talking here about the quality of relationship, which is a very different thing from the intensity of relationship. I am talking about things like mutual respect, tolerance, concern, honesty, attention to each other, which you model in your own behaviour and affirm in the behaviour of your students.

Teaching in any field and at any level will potentially involve both incremental and transformational learning. It can also involve an invitation both to imitation and to individuation. However, there are some fields, and I believe literacy teaching is one of them, where individuation and transformation are at the very centre of the teaching/learning process.

There may appear to be some contradiction between the notion of inviting people to change and the notion of inviting them to be more fully themselves. For myself, I don't find a contradiction here. My experience leads me to accept what thinkers like Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers assert: that we are unfinished people, that there is in all of us a tendency, a drive even, to become more fully ourselves. To become ourselves we have to change much of what we think we are, to change the things we have learned to believe because others believe them, to change the ways we have learned to behave because others approve of them. We spend our childhood and adolescence borrowing ideas, values and behaviour from others and using them to define who we are. Then we can spend the rest of our lives finding that there is more to us

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than the personality we have built with so much effort, and deciding whether we can risk changing. This is a process which takes a lifetime, with or without a midlife crisis to accelerate it.

What teachers do with students may be for better or for worse. I am not suggesting here that teachers should go out and try to engineer (or manipulate, or facilitate) significant changes in the personalities of their students. I am only saying that teachers cannot help having a significant impact on people's lives, that they are as much engaged in the quality of their students' knowing and living as in the quantity of their information and the level of their competence.

Teachers often meet students in the middle of one of the critical decisions of their lives and cannot help being involved in it. They obviously cannot assist people to grow who are determined not to, but they can occasionally experience the excitement and satisfaction when *something happens*, when something they say or do ignites the fuse which leads to a student's transformation.