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Douglas Anderson

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# The Loss of Artful Teaching: Institutionalized Teaching, or Chasing the Finns

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Douglas Anderson is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Pennsylvania State University. This talk, sponsored by the Hersher Institute, was delivered on April 21, 2004, at Sacred Heart University.

DOUGLAS ANDERSON

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*The Loss of Artful Teaching:  
Institutionalized Teaching, or Chasing the Finns*

We philosophers are often accused of working in abstractions and of having our heads in the clouds. Thales, the Greek founder of western philosophy, was said to have fallen in a well while star-gazing. What's perhaps less well known is that Thales was also said to have solved a number of very practical problems. This afternoon I'd like to pursue this more practical side of the philosophical tradition by raising some questions about our contemporary practice of teaching and, I hope, laying the groundwork for some fruitful discussion.

In recent years various alarms have been sounded regarding education in America. In response a variety of programmatic solutions have been offered: providing smaller class sizes, raising standards, providing more standardized tests for teachers and students, producing a science of curriculum development, and employing specific pedagogical theories such as outcomes-based education, whole language reading, and connected mathematics. The most recent cure has been the application of business and managerial practices to schools. My guess is that each of these cures when applied generically will have a least some little benefit and will also likely engender some failure. In being programmatic they often overlook the dynamism and diversity of the learning environment. Consequently, these programmatic solutions have often had the effect of mechanizing or institutionalizing our teaching \_\_\_\_\_

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practices. Indeed, in general we seem in the midst of a movement

toward mechanical pedagogy. In educating our teachers and in administering our schools, we are tending toward a Spartan extreme. This mechanistic approach brings to mind a concern Jacques Barzun gave voice to some years ago: "Teaching is not a lost art but regard for it is a lost tradition."<sup>1</sup> But if the regard for artful teaching is a lost tradition, the loss of artful teaching itself becomes a real possibility. Not as a cynic but as a pragmatic optimist, I want to face this loss, exemplify a few of its causes, and make a few suggestions concerning what we teachers might do in response.

### *Artful Teaching*

There is an artfulness, an element of creativity, in good teaching that requires teachers to be more than technicians. This is not an abstract principle but a truth found in the experiences of teaching and learning. Not just anyone can teach well. And, as William James pointed out long ago, teacher training, though perhaps a necessary condition, is not a sufficient condition for good teaching — certification, we might say, is overrated. Artful teaching, in my experience, is not univocal; good teachers seem to come in a variety of forms and employ a variety of styles. Moreover, students seldom seem to have much trouble figuring out who their artful and effective teachers are; the very question deals with experiential consequences, not with a set of quantified responses. As I proceed to try to make my case, then, I ask that you reflect on one or two of your own best teachers and use that reflection as a measure of what I have to say.

My description of artful or creative teaching is necessarily brief. I offer four general conditions of artful teaching. These do not constitute a program or recipe, but are features found in a straightforward exploration of the experience of artful teaching. They are: autonomy, a willingness to take risks, a responsibility to one's discipline, and a love of one's work and one's students. These features can appear in a myriad of guises, but my suggestion is that they will be found in some form in every creative teacher.

Artful teaching requires autonomy. A teacher must be free to present materials in ways that she finds significant and effective. She must be free to establish a variety of relations with students. She must be free to create or help create the curriculum she teaches. Having

## THE LOSS OF ARTFUL TEACHING

3

developed a curriculum, a teacher must have room to bend it, expand it, or to move spontaneously beyond it. Teacher autonomy means control over course, classroom, and even what have come to be called ``course objectives." As Gill Helsby puts it, ``since teaching is such a complex activity which demands creativity and non-routine decision making, it will require a greater degree of trust in the capacity of teachers to act as semi-autonomous professionals, rather than as compliant technicians in need of constant direction, monitoring, and inspection."<sup>2</sup> Removing a teacher's autonomy disrespects her ability to teach. A teacher must *own* her class in an experiential, not a legal sense. It is the ownership Thoreau had in mind when in *Walden* he remarked that a home required more than a deed – it required a thorough attentiveness to the place one would call ``home." A good teacher is *at home* in her classroom. Nothing is more obvious and awkward to all involved than a teacher's discomfort in a classroom. Yet this is inevitable when teacher autonomy and ownership are lost to a cookie-cutter version of classroom structure and presentation.

Nevertheless, autonomous teaching is risky business. Autonomy places education in the hands of the teachers and leaves the outcomes up to them. In short, we risk living with incoherent and loose-ended consequences of overly spontaneous, cheaply ``creative" teachers (avant-garde teachers?). The trick of artful teaching seems to me to locate the risk in the right place. By artful or creative teaching I do not mean randomly or radically ``different" approaches to teaching. Rather, I have in mind a feature of teaching that has been exemplified repeatedly and thus has its own history. Socrates, Aristotle, and St. Augustine, whose styles varied drastically, all might be considered contributors to this history. So too the teachers whose experiences ground my present reflections – our own best teachers. The most fundamental risk these teachers accept is found in their willingness to confront both success and failure in the interest of teaching better. They risk themselves in being responsible for their work. In this way they are not so different from creative artists in other arenas. Indeed, a classroom, just because it is shot through with human experiences, constitutes a precarious environment, a site of risk, instability, and possibility. A teacher constantly faces the normal contingencies of his work. Certain modes of delivery may work for one group of students and not for another. Students' moods shift and a teacher must become

adept at sensing these shifts and working with them to achieve his aims. Success and abject failure in a class, course, or pedagogical technique are both live possibilities. The artful teacher embraces the risk created by autonomy and allows it to bring teaching alive with a sense of adventure. His creative attitude allows him to fail without thinking that he is a failure. Still, as I will suggest in a while, there is a good deal of fear of teacher autonomy and its attendant risk; and it is this in part that leads us to want to mechanize and institutionalize teaching.

If artful teachers need some freedom, they must also be responsible. It is precisely this feature that concerns those who clamor for improved standards. A lack of teacher responsibility brings into play what John Dewey identified as enemies of true artfulness: "dissipation, incoherence, and aimless indulgence." If creativity and artfulness are taken to mean "doing as you please," these enemies become live possibilities. In short, autonomy and risk that are not complemented by a responsibility to one's discipline will remain arbitrary, incoherent, and reckless, and may have the effect of calling out a reactionary response leading toward the social-scientific, mechanical management of teaching and teachers — what I am here calling institutionalized teaching.

A teacher's responsibilities seem relatively clear. Teachers can be more genuinely artful when they are familiar both with traditional pedagogical practices and with the skills, methods, and histories of their disciplines. This is true in mathematics, the sciences, and the humanities. A teacher's confidence and ability to develop her own curriculum is enhanced by knowing things. However, we needn't set extremely narrow constraints on what is learned or how it is learned — to repeat, good teachers come in a variety of styles. But artful teaching is much less likely to occur if teachers do not take seriously their responsibility to their disciplines and prepare themselves for the task of teaching.

The final criterion of artful teaching is love: both a passion for one's subject and work, and a cherishing concern for one's students. When I think of the teachers I have had from kindergarten forward, these two forms of love stand out as significant features of the best teaching I have encountered. Facing the risks of autonomy displays courage, and accepting the responsibility for familiarity with one's discipline reveals a sense of duty; but both may become mercenary if

## THE LOSS OF ARTFUL TEACHING

5

they are not mediated and underwritten by a genuine concern for others.

In assessing creativity in art, Dewey says, "craftsmanship to be artistic in the final sense must be 'loving'; it must care deeply for the subject matter upon which skill is exercised."<sup>13</sup> This seems no less true in teaching. Passion and caring bring a teacher's subject matter to life. A teacher's passion is infectious and easily engenders the students' interest. When a teacher's passion for his subject matter is genuine and committed, it shows itself and transforms students; they too become believers in its importance. This touch of passionate interest in how and what one teaches transforms the responsibility for knowing things into something more than what we have come to call "professional development." Being "professional" should never mean being apologetic about caring. The list of teachers who have inspired my own learning in this way is not particularly long, but it is absolutely unforgettable.

Passion for one's subject must be joined with a caring love, an agapic love, for one's students. The artful teacher's interest lies in his students not in himself. A cherishing concern for another is a powerful motive, and easily inspires teachers to undertake risks. We risk ourselves for those we love. Without glamorizing or over-romanticizing the fact, this seems to me what the best artful teachers do in a steady fashion. It is not requisite that they show some openly emotive, visible love; rather, the love must simply be part and parcel of all they do in preparing a curriculum, presenting materials, or dealing with students. It is precisely this steady undercurrent of concern that attracts us to Mr. Chips; it is this persistent love that disposes students to write years later of a teacher's crucial influence on their growth.

In our present institutionalized, managerial control of teaching and teachers, we fear the freedom of teachers and distrust teachers to accept the responsibility that comes with freedom. Moreover, passion for one's discipline and caring for one's students are seldom central features of the instruments, the teacher evaluation forms, we create to assess teachers. At a time when we need to generate respect for artful teaching, we seem to be withdrawing the conditions for it. Let me now turn to a few stories and descriptions dealing with our present cultural valuation of teaching: I believe our American institution of teaching is in a state of crisis.

*Challenges to Artful Teaching*

We might begin by simply assessing where teachers stand on a bureaucratic flow chart. In U.S. public schools, teachers stand below a growing list of administrative positions: superintendents, principals, assistant principals, department co-ordinators, curriculum co-ordinators, and counselors, few of whom have any direct engagement with teaching. We have shifted from viewing these positions as enabling and facilitating teaching and teachers to seeing them as positions that *manage* teachers. Indeed, as Betsy Berlin points out, many other nations invest resources in hiring more teachers — typically 60 to 80 percent of staff, as compared with only 43 percent in the United States.<sup>14</sup> She reasonably suggests reorganizing schools "to put the focus back on the classroom" and making "principals' primary role . . . instructional leadership," but there is no evidence that we are willing to do this. The devaluing effects of this bureaucratic layering are several. The most obvious is that teachers are often paid less than even the mid-level administrators in our schools. Even on a purely economic basis this seems unwarranted since the "work" of administrators could be eliminated without much harm to the system, whereas eliminating teachers will yield a direct and immediate harm for students in most cases. Moreover, outside of educational institutions, teaching, with its anti-feminist legacy of being "women's work," remains culturally ranked below other professions such as the medical and legal professions despite its obvious social importance.

We still call teachers "professionals," but given their status in school hierarchies and the effects of unionization, we might more accurately describe them as "labor." In this capacity, if they can display proper credentials — artful teaching not necessarily among them — they can be treated as interchangeable parts in educational structures. This is reflected, for example, in Ronald Rebores's assertion that the "systems' approach to management . . . shifted the emphasis [in assessing teachers' work] from the traditional concept of teacher evaluation to the broader concept of employee appraisal management."<sup>15</sup> The terminological change is not innocent; being a teacher is quite distinct from being an "employee" whose appraisal is to be "managed." This outlook is becoming pervasive among school

## THE LOSS OF ARTFUL TEACHING

7

administrators and, like many other features of contemporary education, it is slowly (and in some cases not so slowly) working its way up into higher education. The new forms of managing teaching have been offered as yet another panacea for our educational problems, but there is precious little evidence that it has had any extensive success.

The managing of teachers and treating of them as interchangeable parts is accompanied by a loss in their autonomy. Freedom, risk, and independent initiative in the art of teaching are less and less to be found in many of our schools; teachers who seek to be creative are often considered to be subversive even when their initiatives are politically innocuous. Two contemporary movements help maintain this loss of autonomy.

Wherever student "standards" initiatives are brought to schools, teachers are in effect made to teach to the standards. From one angle of vision this seems to make sense; we want students to know things and to have skills, and setting standards seems a plausible answer. Unfortunately, setting standards is often a narrowing and dogmatic process that ignores the diversities within our culture, within learning styles, and within teaching styles. Educational theorists have mistaken the need for general levels of skill and knowledge for some theorist's or some state school board's particular canon. Furthermore, they've mistaken a necessary condition of learning for a sufficient condition. Learning's ultimate aim is to free students to learn further, not to have them attain a finite set of skills and ideas. The result is that teachers, especially where standards are narrowly construed, lose the freedom to develop their own aims and to employ the pedagogical techniques best suited to their abilities. As Bickford and Van Vleck suggest, "The artful teacher is always trying new materials and new approaches to fit the needs and interests of the specific learner at hand, never feeling that the 'perfect material' or 'the perfect approach' has been found. The teacher's world is dynamic, filled with uncertainty and challenge, and teaching strategies are guided by a compass, not a road map."<sup>6</sup> When standards become the only focus of teaching, this sort of dynamism and flexibility is lost to the teacher; the art of teaching is transformed into the production of knowledge.

In other ways teachers have lost control of their own curricula. In many schools the curriculum is handed down to teachers from administrators. The most recent trend has been to hire curriculum

specialists who do not teach but who produce the curricula for a school district. Teachers lose the freedom to risk even alterations in a standard curriculum – they lose incentive to be artful. In some cases this dictation of curriculum has reached a point of absurdity.

In one fifth grade class I visited in an upper-middle class school, a teacher produced a three-inch-thick ring binder that held his curriculum instructions for the year. The instructions included not only the generic units of study and the texts to be used but gave a blow-by-blow account of how everything should be taught: twenty minutes for a story, fifteen minutes for a discussion, what questions to ask students about a reading, how students should sit (in circles, on the floor, at desks) for each specific event, and so on. The entire school year was laid out in the book such that no thought whatsoever would be required of the teacher. The teacher in question was infuriated, alienated, and demoralized, but his principal offered no options – at best he would have to be subversive to circumvent the programmatic curriculum he had been given. It takes little experience in teaching to understand the devastating results of such a program. It's the difference between an ordinary cover band and an improvising original – and then we wonder why teachers are ineffective and classrooms are dead. Without autonomy it becomes difficult for teachers to develop the genuine authority they need for successful teaching.

Where authority is concerned, we often also short-change teachers in preparing them to teach. We need them to be responsible to their disciplines, but we have in many instances made this difficult for them. They get limited time in actual classrooms before undertaking the real thing; it should be no surprise therefore that "about a quarter of all beginning teachers drop out after the first year."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, until recently most all teaching programs asked students to take more "education" courses than courses in the subject or subjects they would be teaching. This has led to a severe problem in the present status of teaching: "Nearly 32 percent of all secondary school teachers who teach math do not have certification or a major in math. Sixty-three percent of chemistry, physics, earth, and space science instructors do not have certification or a major in the subject."<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, these numbers are most extreme in poor school districts. A former student who worked with Teach for America found himself in a small city district in North Carolina. He had taken a few college courses in the

## THE LOSS OF ARTFUL TEACHING

9

sciences and mathematics but had graduated with a humanities degree. Within two weeks of joining the school, he was made "chair" of the sciences division. Fortunately, he was bright and energetic and worked diligently in his role. But it's not a hero's story — he just says that "it's worse than he had ever imagined" and that his own efforts did little but stem the tide. Artful teaching requires the kind of responsibility that we make it very difficult to attain with our present structures. As for drawing those with good math and science skills into teaching from outside these structures, we offer neither the income nor the social status that might make it worth one's while.

The absence of incentive, the presence of alienation, and the ongoing devaluation of the American institution of teaching make it very difficult to generate the two forms of love that also underwrite artful teaching. It is difficult to sustain a passion for a curriculum that is not one's own; it can even become difficult to develop care for one's students when they, following the rest of the culture, treat teachers as laborers without authority. Despite all of this, I believe there are still very large numbers of artful teachers in our schools. They teach artfully in spite of the ways we prepare them and in spite of our general cultural devaluation of teaching. Another of my students works with Teach for America teaching fifth grade in rural Mississippi. After three weeks of classroom disorder, he established and posted a set of rules of decorum for his students — they began to respond when they saw he meant it. Then, while teaching one afternoon, his principal walked into the classroom and announced to him and his students that the school had its own rules and that they didn't need his. She tore down the posted rules and walked out. His class *nevertheless* continues to prosper — he cares for his students and he's determined to provide them opportunities. But he does this in spite of the system not because of it.

Before turning to my closing remarks, I need to take a brief detour. We college professors, because we have some autonomy, occasionally think we're immune to the devaluation of teaching. But the crisis of artful teaching is certainly alive and well in what we somewhat pretentiously call "R-1" (research) institutions — large research-oriented universities. To illustrate I will focus on my own home institution, Penn State. Professors, even in the liberal arts, are hired and retained for their "research." Despite lip-service to the

contrary, artful teaching is at best a secondary consideration. All in-house reward structures are geared toward research. There is release-time from teaching as a reward, but never release-time from research as a reward for excellent teaching. The pay scale is for research – the highest paid teach the fewest unless they ask to teach. The lowest paid – including the graduate students who teach over 50% of our courses – teach the most. Ironically, at Penn State the highest teaching award in the University includes a semester off from teaching. Moreover, as is well known, teaching involves the largest classes possible. We currently have courses carrying upward of 800 students; my largest classes are 240 students, but only because the humanities are on the low end of the status pole and can't get larger classrooms. The message to students and teachers is clear – teaching doesn't much matter. Students catch on quickly and reciprocate with expectations of no attendance policies, light work loads, and good grades nevertheless. Recently, Penn State's President stated that the University would become more student-centered; one of his initial suggestions to move in this direction was that we eliminate all 8 A.M. classes. Fortunately, the faculty Senate did not concur. These are not the conditions that engender artful teaching – it just takes more and more artfulness to teach at all. Having taught in a small liberal arts college for six years, I understand the differences between such schools and R-1 universities. Nevertheless, even fifteen years ago features of this university approach to teaching were being built into many other kinds of colleges.

#### *Conclusion*

I do think we're facing a serious crisis in teaching in America; indeed, we're probably facing more than one crisis in teaching. I am not a believer in quick fixes, theory-laden recipes for cure, or the politicizing of teaching. I remain committed to my experience which tells me that good teachers are diverse in their knowledge, approaches, talents, and so forth. It is also my experience that students are equally diverse. In light of this, no simple program will fit all situations or cure all problems in teaching. I am, however, as I mentioned at the outset, a pragmatic optimist – without hope for a return to the respect of artful teaching, it will indeed never come about.

What I would aim at, what I think is practicable, is a long engagement with schools and the society at large for a reawakening to

## THE LOSS OF ARTFUL TEACHING

11

the importance of good teaching. If we transform the culture of teaching, we can open room for the varieties of good teaching to flourish. This engagement, I believe, needs to be led by those already most committed to artful teaching – the artful teachers themselves. Many of them are already subversive in local settings just to teach the ways they need to teach. Resistance to devaluation begins with artful teachers asserting their self-respect and performing their work unapologetically. As those in race studies and women's studies have taught us well, when a society devalues a segment of the culture it becomes difficult for that segment not to apologize for its being. The awakening to artful teaching thus must begin at home. Teachers must both resist further devaluation, and suggest and pursue positive changes in the profession that will reorient us toward respecting good teaching.

This sounds like a daunting task when most teachers already work more hours during the school year than the rest of the population would like to acknowledge – indeed, some folks seem to believe that teaching isn't real work. But the fact remains that teachers have an audience – the most important audience – before them every day. Students need to be brought to believe in the importance of artful teaching. They *will* be aware of the differences it makes in their lives, but they need to see that such teaching is not accidental nor a matter of good fortune. It's a function of hard work and providing the conditions that allow it to flourish. At the university level we might even turn to a discussion of the economic implications of a lack of commitment to teaching – students and parents routinely pay for an education that, by administrators' own admissions, is a secondary concern.

We teachers are good at talk – that's why we are called “professors.” We need to cash in on this ability, making artful teaching visible to the culture, making ourselves visible to the culture. Now, about the Finns. I grew up in a small New England town that was populated by folks of Polish, French, and Finnish descent. In the winter we held snowmobile races on the frozen lakes. Invariably the Finns were the best and many of us from the area have vivid memories of chasing the Finns around frozen lakes. My present pursuit of artful teaching has now turned out to be a similar experience. As was recently reported in the *New York Times*, schools in Finland were ranked best in the world in 2003. This happened despite the fact that

"children do not start school until they are 7," that "spending is a paltry \$5,000 a year per student," and that there are no "gifted programs and class sizes often approach 30."<sup>9</sup> No doubt Finland benefits from a small population with cultural continuity, but they also have more teacher candidates than they can accept despite relatively low wages. "Teaching is the No. 1" aim of most teenagers in Finland says a Finnish teacher. The key factor seems to be that the teaching "profession is highly respected," and that apart from meeting a general core curriculum, teachers "are free to teach the way they want." It seems to me that, under these circumstances, chasing the Finns is both a necessary and a worthwhile occupation.

*Notes*

This paper is a revised version of "Creative Teachers: Risk, Responsibility, and Love," *Journal of Education* 183, no. 1 (2002).

1. Jacques Barzun, *Teacher in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1945), p. 12.

2. Gill Helsby, "Developing Teachers Professionally: Creative Artists or Compliant Technicians," in Christopher Day, et al., *The Life and Work of Teachers* (London: Falmer Press, 2000), p. 107.

3. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), pp. 47-48.

4. Betsy Berlin, "Commission Finds Teaching Profession in Crisis," *Communicator* (1996), p. 2, found at [www.naesp.org](http://www.naesp.org).

5. Ronald W. Rebores, *Personnel Administration in Education: A Management Approach*, third edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991), pp. 183-84.

6. Deborah Bickford and James Van Vleck, "Reflections on Artful Teaching," *Journal of Management Education* 21, no. 4 (1997), p. 460.

7. George A. Clowes [interviewer], "America's Teaching Crisis: Sandra Stotsky," *School Reform News* 3, no. 1 (2001), p. 4.

8. Richard Ingersoll, "The Problem of Unqualified Teachers in American Secondary Schools," *Education Researcher*, March 1999, p. 1, found at [www.mff.org](http://www.mff.org).

9. Lizette Alvarez, "Educators Flocking to Finland, Land of Literate Children," *New York Times*, April 9, 2004, p. A4.