



# Quality in Teaching: Arguments for a Reflective Profession

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# Quality in Teaching

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## *Introduction: Understanding Quality in Teaching*

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*Wilfred Carr*

The question of how to improve the quality of teaching is quite properly perceived to be at the heart of the contemporary educational debate. The main strategy used to stimulate public interest in this question has been to introduce a new rhetoric: phrases, slogans and metaphors which serve to create widespread public concern about teaching, and to make sure that this concern is expressed in a particular way. 'Standards', 'professional competence', 'accreditation', 'accountability' and 'appraisal' are part of the rhetoric now being employed to define 'the problem' of teaching quality and to promote certain practical proposals for its resolution.

The obvious danger of rhetoric is that it has the appearance of a rational form of persuasion while often serving to undermine rational argument and debate. As a result, many of the assumptions underlying the debate about teaching quality remain unexamined, alternative views of 'the problem' are being marginalized and unsubstantiated claims are beginning to acquire the status of literal truth. It is thus scarcely surprising that many teachers and teacher educators regard the current debate about teaching quality as uninformed and naive. Nor should it come as a surprise to find that it is becoming respectable to believe that educational theory has little to contribute to our understanding of teaching. But the more teaching becomes determined by rhetorical persuasion rather than rational argument, the more will it become an ideological activity governed by ideas and 'theories' which are unjustified, unacknowledged and undisclosed.

This book speaks to and for all those teachers and teacher educators who are committed to improving the quality of teaching but who are unwilling to accept that the current rhetoric offers an adequate under-

standing of what this means or how it is to be achieved. The book aims to offer to this audience a set of ideas and arguments which will help them to understand some of the limitations and confusions now infecting contemporary educational discourse, to develop a more defensible notion of what 'teaching quality' might mean and to devise practical means for its advancement.

Although many of these arguments are already well documented in the literature, their interconnections are often difficult to discern. Also, those advancing these arguments do so from very different theoretical perspectives and on the basis of different educational beliefs. The remainder of this introductory chapter outlines the general perspective on teaching quality that the book seeks to advance in order to help readers more readily grasp the book's central argument and more clearly perceive the significance of the contributions that follow.

A conspicuous feature of the government White Paper on *Teaching Quality* is the absence of any serious effort to say precisely what 'quality in teaching' actually means.<sup>1</sup> In consequence the ways in which the concepts of 'teaching' and 'quality' are used in the document are at best limited and partial but more frequently simplistic and naive. More often than not, teaching is portrayed as an unreflective technical process and 'quality' as synonymous with meeting prespecified 'standards' through a system of supervision, inspection and control.<sup>2</sup> *Teaching Quality* may use the rhetoric of professionalism, but in reality this amounts to giving teachers little more than the right to exercise a limited technical discretion within a restrictive framework of bureaucratic rules and managerial controls. Given this limited and limiting perspective, it is important to unpack the notions of 'quality' and 'teaching' so that the ways in which they are now being allowed to structure educational discourse can be better understood.

The concept of 'quality' has two quite different meanings. On the one hand, it can be used in a purely descriptive way to describe what the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* refers to as 'a characteristic trait' or 'a mental or moral attribute'. When it is used in this way, we may talk of somebody possessing the quality of courage or the qualities of a teacher. On the other hand, 'quality' can also be used in a normative sense to indicate a 'degree of excellence'; used in this sense, it signifies which of those 'characteristic traits' and 'mental or moral attributes' are to be deemed valuable or important. To talk of quality *in* teaching is thus to identify those qualities of teaching which constitute its 'excellence'.

In many cases the qualities constituting something's 'excellence' will be



related to its effectiveness. For example, the criteria for judging the quality of a musical instrument will derive from its instrumental value: the effectiveness with which it can be used to pursue some particular human purpose or activity. In other cases, however, judgments of 'quality' can only be made by appealing to criteria derived from the intrinsic value of the activity being judged. The quality of a musical performance, for example, can only be ascertained on the basis of criteria derived from music itself. Any assessment of the quality of a musician's performance cannot, therefore, be divorced from some understanding of the values intrinsic to music. Although such an assessment may take the musician's technical and instrumental skill into account, it will depend primarily on criteria for discerning the musical qualities inherent in his performance.

What this brief and admittedly oversimplified discussion of the concept of 'quality' is intended to make clear is that identifying quality in teaching requires making explicit whether the criteria being employed derive from intrinsic or instrumental values.<sup>3</sup> To the extent that teachers and others who are directly involved in education invariably look upon themselves as professional educators, they will perceive quality in teaching to refer to its intrinsic value as a worthwhile educational process. From this perspective teaching will be of 'quality' insofar as it is perceived to be inherently educative rather than, say, a process of passive instruction or training. Indeed, if teachers and others involved in education did not perceive their teaching in this way, their conception of themselves as professional *educators* would largely disappear.

It need hardly be said that those who are not themselves professional educators — such as politicians, economists and employers — will tend to interpret and assess teaching quality in terms of values external to the educational process. From their perspectives, education is seen primarily as something which serves extrinsic purposes such as the national interest, the economic needs of society, or the demands of the labour market. Judgments about teaching quality in these cases will not be made by appealing to the criteria which serve to enhance teaching as an educational process, but by using criteria that enhance the effectiveness of teaching as a means to ends which are not themselves examined from an educational point of view. The important issues raised by the current debate about teaching are thus not simple technical questions about how quality is to be improved, but complex and largely contentious questions about how teaching quality is to be interpreted and understood. In *Teaching Quality* such questions are ignored and the document offers little more than bureaucratically framed specifications of 'quality' together with a series of control mechanisms — such as the inspection and accreditation of teacher education — for

ensuring that these specifications are being met.<sup>4</sup> What is conspicuously lacking is an interpretation of 'teaching quality' which acknowledges the importance of educational values and recognizes teachers as professional educators, committed to enhancing their professionalism by improving the educational quality of their work.

If the notion of 'teaching quality' is to be interpreted in these terms, it is necessary for the rhetoric now dominating educational discourse to be replaced by a language which, will render the qualities constitutive of good teaching more intelligible, and so stimulate a more rational and enlightened educational debate. The important question to ask, therefore, is whether there is a language of teaching quality which is more compelling than the technical and bureaucratic forms of educational discourse which now prevail.

The most influential and eloquent contemporary advocate of such a language is undoubtedly J.J. Schwab. In his seminal paper, 'The Practical: A Language for the Curriculum',<sup>5</sup> Schwab argued that a general over-reliance on technical language had led to the fragmentation of educational thinking, a morally impoverished view of teaching and a failure to provide teachers with a capacity to confront the practical problems they face in their everyday work. These defects, argued Schwab, can only be overcome if the technical language now dominating educational discourse (which he refers to as 'the language of the theoretic') is replaced by the language of the 'practical'. In suggesting this, however, Schwab made it clear that

By the 'practical' I do *not* mean the curbstone practicality of the mediocre administrator and the man on the street for whom the practical means the easily achieved familiar goals which can be reached by familiar means. I refer rather to a complex discipline relatively unfamiliar to the academic and differing radically from the disciplines of the theoretic. It is the discipline concerned with choice and action, in contrast with the theoretic, which is concerned with knowledge. Its methods lead to defensible decisions where the methods of the theoretic lead to warranted conclusions.<sup>6</sup>

In arguing for the interpretation of teaching as a 'practical' discipline, Schwab was explicitly invoking the Aristotelian distinction between technical and practical discourse.<sup>7</sup> For Aristotle, technical discourse is the language appropriate to thinking about how to act in order to bring about some determinate end. By contrast, practical discourse is the language

appropriate to thinking about how to act in order to realize ethical values and goals. For Aristotle, as for Schwab, technical and practical discourse serve very different purposes and operate in very different ways. The overall purpose of technical discourse is to decide which course of action will most effectively achieve some known end — as, for example, when a teacher has to decide whether the ‘phonic’ or the ‘whole-word’ approach to reading is the most effective means of producing a specific learning outcome. The overall purpose of practical discourse, however, is to make a morally informed judgment about what ought to be done in a particular practical situation — as, for example, when an infant teacher has to decide whether it would be educationally justifiable to teach pupils the mechanics of language and arithmetic or whether it would be more appropriate to concentrate on responding to pupils’ natural curiosity and interest. Practical discourse is thus required when teachers are faced with moral dilemmas about how to apply their educational values to a particular practical situation. Practical discourse is the language teachers employ when they have to decide what it would be educationally justifiable for them to do in some problematic classroom situation.

The essence of Schwab’s argument is that teaching is primarily a ‘practical’ rather than ‘technical’ activity, involving a constant flow of problematic situations which require teachers to make judgments about how best to transfer their general educational values (such as ‘the development of understanding’ or ‘the self-realization of the individual’s potential’) into classroom practice. Interpreted in the language of the ‘practical’, ‘teaching quality’ would have little to do with the skilful application of technical rules but instead would relate to the capacity to bring abstract ethical values to bear on concrete educational practice — a capacity which teachers display in their knowledge of what, educationally, is required in a particular situation and their willingness to act so that this knowledge can take a practical form. Without this capacity good teaching becomes indistinguishable from technical expertise. The teacher who lacks this capacity may be technically accountable but cannot be educationally or morally answerable.

Schwab’s argument for the interpretation of teaching as a ‘practical art’ poses a serious challenge to received views about how teaching is to be developed and improved. In Britain this challenge was taken up by Lawrence Stenhouse who, like Schwab, insisted that teaching is primarily an ‘art’ in which general educational ideas acquire practical expression. ‘In art’, he wrote, ‘ideas are tested in form by practice. Exploration and interpretation lead to revision and adjustment of idea and of practice . . . That is what good teaching is like. It is not like routine engineering or routine management.’<sup>8</sup>

Given his view of teaching, Stenhouse faced the dilemma of mounting a national curriculum development project without resorting to the technical language of the then dominant 'objectives' model of curriculum planning and design. His response to this dilemma was to develop a theory of curriculum development and research which relied heavily on R.S. Peters' philosophical analysis of educational aims.

In 'Must an Educator Have an Aim?' Peters argued that the aims of education are not terminal endpoints to which teaching is the instrumental means.<sup>9</sup> Instead, they are attempts to specify the values to be realized *in* and *through* teaching and which justify the description of any teaching act as an educational process. Peters' own argument to this effect is worth quoting at length.

Talk about 'the aims of education' depends to a large extent on a misunderstanding about the sort of concept that 'education' is . . . . Education is not a concept that marks out any particular process . . . rather it suggests criteria to which processes . . . must conform. One of these is that something of value should be passed on . . . . However, this cannot be construed as meaning that education itself should lead on to or produce something of value. This is like saying that reform must lead to a man being better . . . . The point is that making a man better is not an aim extrinsic to reform; it is a criterion which anything must satisfy which is to be called reform. In the same way a necessary feature of education is often extracted as an extrinsic end. People thus think that education must be for the sake of something extrinsic that is worthwhile, whereas being worthwhile is part of what is meant by calling it 'education'. The instrumental model of education provides a caricature of this necessary feature of desirability by conceiving what is worthwhile as an end brought about by the process . . . .<sup>10</sup>

Thus, educational aims such as 'critical thinking' or 'rational autonomy' refer to what Peters calls 'principles of procedure' — values to which any educational process governed by these aims must conform. To cite these educational aims as desirable is thus not simply to imply that role-learning, memorization or other forms of teaching which are incompatible with critical thinking or rational autonomy are ineffective methods of teaching and learning. Rather, it is to cite criteria for judging whether these teaching methods have any intrinsic educational value and hence whether they constitute genuine educational processes at all.

On the basis of Peters' philosophical analysis, Stenhouse was able to

elaborate a view of curriculum development which avoided the technological assumptions of the 'objectives' approach. In the 'objectives' approach the aim of curriculum development is to relate empirically verified principles of effective teaching to the need to achieve predetermined educational goals. For Stenhouse, however, curriculum development is understood as a way of relating the educational values already implicit in the teaching process, to teachers' professional obligation to improve the educational quality of their practice. Stenhouse thus advanced a 'process' model of curriculum development — a model which construed curriculum development as the process through which teachers deepen their insight into their own educational values and develop their capacity to translate these values into classroom practice.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, for Stenhouse, curriculum development was synonymous with professional development, and professional development was itself construed as a research process in which teachers systematically reflect on their practice and use the results of this reflection in such a way as to improve their own teaching. By relating this idea of 'teacher as researcher' to an analysis of professionalism, Stenhouse was able to argue that professional development required teachers to be provided with opportunities and resources to study their own practice through systematic reflection and research.

There can be no doubt that Stenhouse's work led to a more enlightened view of curriculum development and a more defensible notion of teacher professionalism. It is also clear that his 'process' view of curriculum development and his model of 'teacher as researcher' have contributed significantly to the advancement of Schwab's aspiration for the reconstruction of teaching as a 'practical art'. However, the developments generated by Stenhouse's ideas (such as school-based curriculum development and educational action research) have led to new questions which his own theoretical framework did not address. For example, although Stenhouse linked his idea of 'teacher as researcher' to the professional development of teachers, it is now obvious that the epistemological assumptions underpinning his notion of 'professionalism' need to be explicated and assessed in a more systematic way. What, in particular, is required is a detailed analysis of the nature of the professional knowledge informing the art of the teacher.

Donald Schon's book, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*,<sup>12</sup> opens with a description of professional artistry which is clearly reminiscent of Stenhouse's image of teaching as an art:

Inherent in the practice of the professionals we recognise unusually competent, is a core of artistry . . . . Artistry is a kind of

intelligence, a kind of knowing though different in crucial aspects from our standard model of professional knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

For Schon, 'our standard model of professional knowledge' fails to comprehend 'professional artistry' because it derives from a misguided epistemology of practice — an epistemology which is 'built into the very foundations of the modern university' and shapes our understanding of the relationship of research, professional knowledge and professional practice. Schon calls this dominant epistemology of practice 'technical rationality'.

Embedded in technical rationality, argues Schon, is the assumption that a 'profession' is an occupational group whose practice is grounded in knowledge derived from scientific research. In consequence, professional knowledge is taken to refer to theoretical knowledge about how to achieve given ends; professional practice is seen as a process of problem-solving, and professional competence as the skilful application of theoretical knowledge to the instrumental problems of practice. Within this epistemology of practice, notes Schon, artistry has no lasting place.

From the perspective of technical rationality, it follows that teaching is a profession only to the extent that it involves applying theoretical knowledge to the pursuit of fixed educational ends. The fact that much of the theoretical knowledge made available to teachers often lacks practical application, together with the admission that the 'ends' of teaching are always contentious and often conflicting, merely serve to confirm the popular view that teaching is only a profession in a limited and restrictive sense.

Schon argues that a view a professional knowledge based on technical rationality is inadequate on at least three major counts. First, by assuming that professional knowledge can be produced in isolation from the situation in which it is to be applied, it ignores the extent to which such knowledge always has to be 'embedded in the socially structured context shared by a community of practitioners' and 'exercised in the institutional settings particular to the profession'.<sup>14</sup> Second, because of its general indifference to the ways in which professionals actually work, technical rationality fails to recognize that they rarely 'apply' theoretical knowledge to their practice. Instead, they operate on the basis of their own, largely tacit, knowledge of what they are doing and what they are trying to achieve. Professional knowledge is thus not a systematically organized body of theoretical knowledge but a shared body of inherited 'practical knowledge', that is, '... a common body of explicit more or less systematically organized knowledge ... a set of values, preferences and norms in terms of which they make sense of practical situations, formulate goals and direction for action and

determine what constitutes acceptable professional conduct'.<sup>15</sup>

Third, although technical rationality portrays professional competence as a technical problem-solving competence, the problems of the real world of practice 'do not present themselves to the practitioner as givens', but as 'messy', 'indeterminate' and 'problematic' situations which arise because of 'conflicting values' (such as the conflicting requirements of efficiency and equality or equality and quality).<sup>16</sup> Such problems cannot be resolved by the use of techniques derived from theoretical research but call for what Schon terms 'artful competence' — a non-technical process in which practitioners clarify their understanding of 'a problematic situation' in a way which enables them to redefine their problems in terms of both the ends to be achieved and the means for their achievement.

On the basis of his critique of technical rationality, Schon concludes that the question of the relationship between professional knowledge and professional competence needs to be turned upside down:

If the model of Technical Rationality . . . fails to account for practical competence in 'divergent' situations so much the worse for the model. Let us search instead for an epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict.<sup>17</sup>

In *The Reflective Practitioner* Schon puts aside the model of technical rationality and, through a careful examination of professional artistry, develops an epistemology of practice which places technical problem-solving within the broad framework of reflective enquiry. The central concepts used by Schon to construct this epistemology are those of 'knowing-in-action' and 'reflection-in-action'.

'Knowing-in-action' refers to the professional knowledge that practitioners actually use, which is implicit in their action, and often difficult to describe. 'Knowing-in-action refers to the sorts of "know-how" we reveal in our intelligent action. The knowing is *in* action. We reveal it by our spontaneous skilful execution of the performance, and we are characteristically unable to make it verbally explicit.'<sup>18</sup>

'Reflection-in-action' is the process central to the 'art' by which professionals deal with 'problematic situations'. It occurs precisely when a situation arises which indicates that the professionals' existing stock of knowledge — their 'knowing-in-action' — is no longer adequate. 'Reflection-in-action' arises, says Schon, when our

. . . routine responses produce a surprise . . . . Surprise leads to reflection within an action-present. We consider both the un-



expected event and the knowing-in-action that led up to it . . . . Reflection-in-action has a critical function, questioning the assumptional structure of knowing-in-action. We think critically about the thinking that got us into this fix.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, for Schon, 'reflection-in-action' involves reflecting on 'knowing-in-action'. It is the process through which the hitherto taken for granted knowledge implicit in action is made explicit, critically examined, reformulated and tested through further action. In this sense 'reflection-in-action' is a research process through which the development of professional knowledge and the improvement of professional practice occur simultaneously.

When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique but constructs a new theory of the unique case. His inquiry is not limited to a deliberation about means which depends on a prior agreement about ends. He does not keep means and ends separate but defines them interactively as he frames a problematic situation. He does not separate thinking from doing . . . his experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is built into his enquiry.<sup>20</sup>

By outlining the structure of 'reflection-in-action' Schon not only emphasizes the impoverishment of technical rationality as a basis for professional knowledge and practice, but also eliminates the familiar dualisms it sustains. From the perspective of technical rationality, means are separated from ends, knowing from doing and action from research. From the perspective of 'reflection-in-action' these dualisms are reunited through the single process of reflection.

The previous section has shown how Schwab, Stenhouse and Schon provide us with a language of teaching which is very different from our dominant educational discourse. It is a language which eschews the image of teachers as skilful technicians and instead portrays them as practitioners of the art of translating abstract educational values into concrete educational practice. It is primarily an ethical language which recognizes that teachers are guided by moral values and constantly under a professional obligation to justify their work in educational terms.

Once the language of teaching is construed as an ethical form of discourse, the division between 'professional knowledge' and 'professional



practice' begins to break down. Professional knowledge no longer appears as an externally produced body of value-free theoretical knowledge but as that implicitly accepted body of value-laden knowledge which teachers use to make sense of their practice. On this view, teachers develop professionally by reflecting critically on their own tacit practical knowledge rather than by applying theoretical knowledge produced by academic experts. The acquisition of professional knowledge and the improvement of professional practice cannot be differentiated: each is constituted by, and constitutive of, the other.

When teaching is interpreted in this way, 'quality' has little to do with measuring up to a list of performance criteria but instead is something that can only be judged by reference to those ethical criteria which teachers tacitly invoke to explain the educational purpose of their teaching. This means that teaching quality cannot be improved other than by improving teachers' capacity to realize their educational values through their practice. It also means that this process of improvement can be nothing other than a research process in which teachers reflect on their practice and use the products of their reflections to reconstruct their practice as an *educational* practice in a systematic and rational way.

When the current rhetoric of 'teaching quality' is considered from this standpoint, three related conclusions begin to emerge. The first is that, by eliminating ethical categories from our educational discourse, the current rhetoric has so transformed our concept of teaching that it is now understood as a technical activity conducted for utilitarian purposes rather than as an ethical activity directed towards moral and social ends. The second is that in the course of this transformation, our conception of education is being distorted and that it is only by remoralizing our educational discourse that such distortions can be avoided. The third is that the task of remoralizing our educational discourse will only be achieved if we are prepared to raise critical questions about how teaching is now being interpreted and understood. Can our understanding of teaching remain intelligible once it has been separated from its moral, social and political roots? Why are we so keen to embrace the idea of teaching as a technical activity, and why are we misguided to do so? Do our current notions of professionalism and professional development recognize the extent to which educational values are part of the very fabric of teaching? Do proposed methods of teacher appraisal do justice to a concept of teaching in which the role of reflection plays a central part? Although these questions are by no means exhaustive, they serve to identify some of the central issues explored in this book.

The chapters in the first section, 'The Philosophical and Social Context of Teaching', explore the rationale for the view of teaching generally