DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 323 EA 019 418

AUTHOR Barrow, Robin
TITLE Skill Talk.
PUB DATE 1 Jun 87
NOTE 24p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Ability; *Cognitive Ability; *Creative Thinking; *Critical Thinking; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Interpersonal Competence; *Logical Thinking; Psychomotor Skills; *Skills; *Teacher Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS Jargon; *Subject Content Knowledge; Syllogisms

ABSTRACT

This paper questions teacher evaluation based solely on "research based competencies" or "generic teaching skills" divorced from subject content or specific context. Three topics are discussed: (1) the use of the word "skill" in educational discourse; (2) the implications of such usage; and (3) the plausibility of thinking in terms of generic teaching skills and understanding. The word "skill" is often used indiscriminately to describe very different types of skill, including physical, intellectual, perceptual, social, creative, and interpersonal activity. The first section discusses some of the potentially important distinctions obscured by the cavalier use of the word. The relative educational importance of various skills is also questioned. The second section treats the distinction between skill and ability, terms that current usage renders as synonymous. It is particularly dangerous to think of critical thinking skills as physical behaviors perfected by practice and context-free. The third section relates the generic skills issue to teaching, which does not embody routine performance of these skills, but involves helping students respond critically, creatively, and enthusiastically to certain areas of understanding. To that end, a crucial criterion for teacher evaluation is mastery of some worthwhile subject matter. Included are 11 references. (MLH)

SKILL TALK

ROBIN BARROW
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
BURNABY, BC, CANADA

1 June 1987

Skill Talk

Lee Shulman, a doyen of educational researchers, recently reviewed and contrasted the approaches to teacher evaluation of 100 years ago and today.[1] He points, by way of representative example, to the California State Examination for Elementary School Teachers of March, 1875. Teachers (or would-be teachers) took a day long test in twenty areas. Of these areas, twelve were straightforward subject matter tests (e.g., geography, arithmetic, algebra, history of the United States), and five more could be similarly classified at a pinch (composition, reading, orthography, defining, and vocal music). Two might reasonably be seen as skills, but skills nonetheless relating to the content to be taught (penmanship and industrial drawing). One category only, capable of generating a mere 50 out of a thousand possible marks, was concerned with the theory and practice of teaching.

In other words, at that date, 90 - 95% of the examination of teachers concentrated on their mastery of the subject matter to be taught. This is to be contrasted with the state of affairs today where "in most states ... the evaluation of teachers emphasises the assessment of capacity to teach", and the various categories in such examinations are defined and justified in terms of "research based teacher competencies" ("research", of course, being treated as synonymous with "empirical research", as is the way these days).[2] The issue is no longer one of establishing whether the teachers understand what it is they are supposed to impart to students, but rather one of establishing whether they have various so-called "generic teaching skills", such as the ability to make ordered turns, to control time on task, to use a range of types of questioning, and to deploy various other specific and more or less discretely conceived teaching techniques or behaviours.

Furthermore, as some of us have argued before, no doubt too vociferously, and as Shulman himself now concedes, the positing of these various skills, their definition and their presumed efficacy, all emanate from research that has been conducted with a conspicuous disregard for the subject matter being taught in any given situation.[3] The emphasis in such research is "on how teachers manage their classrooms ... allocate time and turns, structure assignments, ascribe praise and blame, formulate the levels of their questions (and) plan lessons",[4] and prescriptions are derived from the research without any serious attempt to consider the varying form such activities might have to take and the varying importance they might have in the context of different subject matters with different immediate and long-term educational objectives.

Shulman refers to this lack of concern for content as "the missing paradigm" and suggests that research (and, a fortiori, the evaluation of teachers) should be supplemented by reference to content knowledge (i.e. knowledge of subjects to be taught), pedagogic content knowledge (i.e. knowledge of the workings of the student mind and efficacious ways of approaching it) and curricular knowledge (i.e. knowledge of resources and other aspects of the student's curriculum).[5] However, his proposals do not, I think, strike to the heart of the matter. He is certainly beginning to ask a wider variety of questions of teachers and introducing a greater variety of means of eliciting information (for example, he has begun to concentrate on case studies and to amass intellectual biographies rather than relying on achievement tests). But the fundamental assumption that there are significant generic skills of teaching and generalizable principles of teaching and learning divorced from specific contexts remains, as does the assumption that research can proceed intelligibly without a careful understanding of the context of particular instances of teaching observed ("context" here

encompassing both the nature of particular subject matters and the particular natures of different students and teachers). (The crucial point that no research into effective teaching makes sense unless it is conducted in the light of an explicitly, fully and clearly articulated conception of what it is to be successfully educated, also continues to be ignored.[6])

In what follows I shall consider, first, the way in which the word "skill" is used in educational discourse, secondly I shall consider some of the implications of the way it is used, and, thirdly, I shall examine and question the plausibility of thinking in terms of generic skills of teaching and (from a student perspective) understanding.

I

The word "skill" is ubiquitous in contemporary educational discourse. It is also indisputable that it is used indiscriminately of what are at best very different types of skill. For example, reference may be made to physical or motor skills such as the young child's ability to grasp an object or the sleight of hand of the conjuror, and also to intellectual skills such as those of reasoning or analysing and the skills of the historian or physicist; there is talk of social skills such as those of relating to people or more general interpersonal skills such as those of refusal and communication (the distinction between social, interpersonal, and, indeed, personal skills, if there is one, being by no means clear). Equally prevalent are references to perceptual skills such as those of recognising and differentiating between colours or musical notes, and creative skills such as those of painting or writing poetry. Inasmuch as physical, intellectual, perceptual, social, creative and interpersonal operations seem on the face of it and for the most part decidedly different kinds of activity, it is to be deemed unfortunate at the outset that the word "skill" may serve to blur the differences.

Secondly, in addition to these major, different categories of skill, distinctions may be drawn (though, again, skill talk is generally slow to do so) between the degree of determination of various skills. Some skills, such as that of clicking one's fingers, are discrete; others, such as those involved in riding a bike, are not readily disentangled and consequently "the skill of riding a bike" in fact refers to a set of skills the precise demarcation of each of which would be hard to arrive at. Some skills and sets of skills are readily perceptible, as is the case with these two examples. Others, such as, for example, the skills of the historian are not. To some

extent this difference is simply the product of different kinds of activity, but to some extent it is the product of another differentiating factor amongst skills, namely the extent to which their precise constitution and boundaries can be determined. What exactly we mean by the various putative skills of the historian is surely harder to say than what we mean by the various skills of a good oarsman.

A third area in which skill talk generally fails to differentiate when it would be possible to do so is with reference to the conditions most likely or most suited to fostering or developing various skills (as opposed to the means or manner of encouraging or cultivating them which will be referred to below). It is, I would suggest, a necessary condition of something counting as a skill that it should be something that, however widespread, predictable and normal it may be, nonetheless has to be developed, learned or acquired. Thus anything that is presumed to be an automatic physiological response to the environment, such as blinking one's eyes, cannot be a skill. Nonetheless, there are some skills, such as that of walking and other basic motor skills, which, while they are certainly skills, appear to develop more or less inevitably in a wide variety of particular situations. For example, while the child has to develop the capacity to grasp objects, whereas it either possesses the capacity to blink or it does not, it will be exceedingly unusual if it fails to develop that capacity, whether situated in the midst of a middle class family in New York or a band of gorillas in a Borneo jungle. Some skills, then, may be said to develop more or less inevitably. Other skills, while certainly not inevitable even in my qualified sense, nonetheless seem usually to develop in the context of, and presumably as a consequence of, any type of specifically human environment, as is the case, for example, with the acquisition of language. The wild boy of Aveyron developed various motor

skills, but, divorced from a specifically human environment, he did not develop language skills; but children generally develop language skills to some degree as readily as they do various motor skills[7]. Of other skills that are less widely distributed amongst the population, the conditions that are necessary to or congenial to their development are obviously very varied. Some, such as the skill of juggling, do not require much in the way of resources or any particular circumstances; others, such as the skills of the trapeze artist, do. Some, such as the skills of the photographer, are as likely to be developed in isolation as amongst a group; others such as the skills of the rugby player necessarily require other people, or, as in the case of the skills of the philatelist will probably benefit from communication with others. There are skills that by and large one may learn for oneself, whether with ease or with difficulty, (e.g. bowling and swimming), and those that in some form or another require teaching, essentially because they involve performing according to man-made rules and norms. Thus one may learn to plane wood on one's own, because the object of the exercise and the criteria of success can be set by oneself (to produce a smooth piece of wood of the desired proportions), whereas, by and large, one would need to be taught how to write a good essay, because what is meant by and what constitutes a good essay (in a particular context) is tied up with an elaborate, humanly devised, set of purposes and techniques.

A fourth matter on which skill talk is generally reticent is that of the various means whereby various skills may be acquired or learned. While, for example, popular opinion has it that the only way to acquire the skills of riding a bike is to get on one and keep at it until they are developed, it is clear that though one could acquire the skill of planing wood by trial and error(as we have just seen), one might also acquire it through imitation or as

a result of direct instruction. More generally, the tendency to refer to everything from planing a piece of wood to being a successful prime minister as "skills" contributes to disguising the varying complexity even of discrete skills within a category, let alone sets of skills and skills in different categories. For example, the skill of clicking one's fingers is surely easier to acquire than the skill of lawn bowling, and the skills of the historian, whatever they are, are of a higher order than the skills of the philatelist.

Finally, little account is taken in skill talk of the extent to which such things as understanding, disposition, values and emotional maturity are involved in the acquisition of all but the simplest physical skills. Acquiring interpersonal skills, the skills of the researcher in a particular field, or creative skills, involves to a very large extent understanding of such diverse things as bodies of knowledge and people, being committed to certain values such as truth or kindness, and being disposed to do certain kinds of thing rather than others. (In connection with this point, a rather curious point may be noted. Words such as "skillful" and "skilled" are clearly normative: a skilled speaker is a good one, as is a skillful carpenter. But the way in which educationalists talk of developing various skills as a matter of course in schools must serve to make "skill" a more neutral term, on the Gilbertian principle that "when everyone is somebody, then noone's anybody").

In short, I suggest, such is the manner in which educationalists tend to talk and write about skills, that it is hard to avoid drawing the inference that, for example, the skill(s) of critical thinking is so-called because it is presumed to be a skill in the same sort of way as, or of the same order as, the skill of getting on with people or the skill of executing a decent somersault. I should perhaps add that the distinctions to which I draw

attention are not presumed to be definitive, clear-cut, exhaustive or fully realised. Clearly, some so-called skills may be partly physical and partly intellectual, for instance; disinctions may often be a matter of degree, and some skills may simply be hard to classify. As has already been indicated, simple physical skills might be taught, even if they are often developed more or less autonomously in fact, while complex intellectual skills might conceivably be acquired without the aid of teachers. My point has been simply to draw attention to some of the various potentially important distinctions between skills that the cavalier use of the word is in danger of obscuring. To these should be added the most important of all, namely the relative educational importance or worth of various skills. If education is to be conceived of largely in terms of skills, and if everything from crossing one's eyes to deciphering Linear B is to be classified as a skill, there is a very real danger that we shall forget that some skills are of no educational significance whatsoever.

II

The question arises, as to whether this lack of differentiation between skills of various sorts matters. After all, a lot of talk is general and confused, at least as judged by philosophers, but to no obvious ill-effect, as, for example, is the case with buzz words such as "brainstorming" "lateral thinking" "relevance" and indeed "buzz words" itself. The answer, I think, is that it would not matter, if we were willing to accept the consequence that "skill" is a very general word meaning no more than "ability" (which is a very general word, and no philosopher would want to write a paper lamenting the fact). But I would strongly urge that we should not be willing to accept this consequence, for the following reasons.

1. First, a synonym for "ability" is unnecessary. It is true that English has often been admired for its unusually rich store of synonyms, but that is with an eye to the very different connotations of the synonymous words and the advantages that that may have, particularly for artistic and expressive communication. "Skills", as I shall note below (see 5), does have particular connotations (and very unfortunate ones for our purposes) that "abilities" does not have. However, we are concerned here with rational rather than poetic discourse, and for that purpose the distinctive connotations are neither necessary nor useful.[8] I cannot, in short, see any strong reason for wanting a synonym for "ability".

2. Secondly, the use of the word "skill" as a synonym for "ability" is, very often pleonastic. We do not need to say that someone has the abilities or skills of the historian, for it adds nothing to saying that he is an historian.

3. Thirdly, using "skill" as a synonym for "ability" is in fact incorrect, at least according to Webster's Dictionary, where we are told that a skill is "1) a great ability or proficiency, expertness that comes from training or practice, or 2a) an art, craft or science, especially one involving the use of hand or body, and 2b) ability in such an art, craft or science." In other words a skill is defined as a specific sub-class of ability, and the more general definition of a skill as "3) knowledge, understanding or judgement" is specifically referred to as obsolete.

Such an entry in the dictionary makes it quite clear that, in terms of standard usage of the word "skill", examples of skills would be such things as the ability to dribble a ball, the ability to plane a piece of wood, or the sleight of hand of the conjuror. The concept of a skill, that is to say, is closely tied up with notions of physicality, training and perfection through practice, and minimally involved with understanding. It may of course be said that language is fluid, and that if my account of the nature and implications of skill talk above is accurate then it is a matter of fact that the dictionary is behind the times. The evidence shows that the word "skill" is not confined to abilities that come from training or practice. Such an observation certainly seems legitimate, but it brings me to my remaining two points.

4. The fourth point is that it is useful to have a word to pick out this particular sub-class of abilities, and I cannot think of another that can do the job. It is useful, just as it is useful to continue to distinguish between the broad class of feelings and the sub-class of emotions, which are a particular kind of feeling, rather than to obscure the differences by treating "emotion" and "feeling" as synonyms. Our understanding of the world is the

more complete insofar as we are able to draw distinctions within broad categories, as well as to register the common elements that lead to the classification of the latter.

5. The final point is the crucial one, but it does not stand on its own. Rather, it arises out of the previous points. Since there is no other word for "skill" as defined by the dictionary, since it is so defined by the dictionary, and since it is to be presumed that therefore this is what a "skill" means to many people, there is a very real danger that the connotations of the word in the dictionary's sense will carry over for a number of people, even to uses where no such connotations are or could logically be implied. In which case we should be in evident and serious trouble, for there is no obvious reason for thinking of, say, the skills of critical thinking or refusal skills as being behaviours that are essentially physical, perfected by practice, relatively context free (of which more below) and involve minimal understanding.

I therefore conclude that this tendency to use the word skill as a general term, synonymous with ability, is to be resisted because of the likelihood of misleading implications. If this were a purely hypothetical point, I would probably let it go. But it seems to me that this danger is precisely one that we can see has come to pass. Whatever they might say if pressed on the point, educators talk as if, and they proceed as if, critical thinking were a skill like dribbling a ball, albeit more complex, and could be trained or developed in the same kind of way - namely by practice in the activity itself and of itself. That, at any rate, is the presumption that is logically implied by the nature of most actual programmes in critical thinking, values clarification, interpersonal skill development, and the

logically similar tests of creativity, means of evaluating teacher effectiveness or prescriptions for curriculum design. Certainly, if something other than the idea that the mind and the emotions can be exercised, and capacities developed, analogously to the exercise and development of physical skills, is presupposed by typical curriculum injunctions to develop emotional, interpersonal and intellectual skills, it remains unclear what that something is.

III

In this section I wish to amplify slightly what has already been said about the concept of a skill in the dictionary sense of the word, in order to explore the notion of generic skills. As we have seen, the ability to dribble a ball, the sleight of hand of the conjuror and the ability to plane a piece of wood well are clearly skills. They are abilities that are minimally involved with understanding, that are essentially physical, and that are perfected by practice at the activity itself.

If we turn to the skills of, say, the historian or even the skills of reading and writing, we see that some at least of these so-called skills are quite different kinds of thing. It may be reasonable to see the ability to form letters or decode words as skills in the sense of physical abilities, perfected by practice, though even here there is a difference in that such "skills" involve considerably greater understanding than does the skill of dribbling a ball. (Forming a letter is not all that we require - we also want it recognised as a symbol for a sound, and when it comes to decoding words, we want the trained ability to see the word for what it is to be supplemented by understanding of the word - an understanding that grows increasingly complex as time goes by). But certainly the "skills" of reading and writing or being a historian involve many that have nothing to do with a trained, physical, ability. The skills of the historian, for instance, include imagination, knowledge and intellect. The important practical point is that whereas one helps someone to perfect the skill of planing wood largely by helping them perform the operation and giving them practice, perhaps supplemented by a minimum of explanation (e.g. if you press too heavily, it will not run smoothly), one does not help somebody to become a sophisticated reader or a

good historian by getting them to practice specific operations, so much as by giving them understanding of literature and history.

It will be noted that not only are these kinds of "skill" not physical or trainable, but they are also context bound. The skill of planing wood or dribbling a ball is something that, if one has it, one may put to use in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes. The skills of the historian - the ability to weigh evidence, for example - are not things that can be transferred. This has nothing to do with empirical arguments about transference; it is a matter of logic that weighing evidence in moral philosophy requires understanding that is not given by learning to weigh evidence in history. To be sure there may be aspects of being good at weighing evidence in history that will find application elsewhere, such as a disposition to do so, though I would rather say that these are characteristics of the individual than that they are abilities which they transfer; but what is certain is that the skills of the historian involve intellectual abilities that come about through understanding history rather than practising the skills, and that have no obvious bearing on one's ability to show similar ability in different contexts.

This brings us to perhaps the most insidious use of the word skill - namely to pick out alleged generic intellectual abilities, as in reference to critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, creativity skills or values clarification skills. It is important to understand what is at issue here - not simply terminology - but what kind of thing critical thinking, problem-solving, being creative, etc., are. And the practical issue that I am concerned with is that some educationalists appear to want us to concentrate on techniques for developing these skills, without reference to particular subject matters; but while a true skill can be developed in this way, such

things as the ability to think critically or be creative, whether we call them skills or not, cannot.

The first thing to be said is that there is no way in which critical thinking can coherently be said to be a skill: it is not an isolatable, discrete ability, comparable to planing wood or having sleight of hand. But nor can it be said to consist simply in a set of skills. As a matter of logic one has to think critically about something (or display one's creative talents in some specific context or contexts).[9] And since what constitutes sound critical thought or creative expression in one area such as history, differs from what constitutes it in another (say, physics), it follows that a necessary condition of being critical or creative is understanding of particular domains. To put this more formally, while logic may be common to all critical thinking, the form that logic takes differs in different contexts. It may be that practice at critical thinking has some value, in terms of such things as developing an inclination to be critical and giving one understanding of the idea of contradiction or sound syllogistic reasoning, but what it can't do in and of itself is make one good at critical thinking. Mutatis mutandis, the same applies to courses in logic or pratice in solving problems or in clarifying one's values.

Not only are such skill-based approaches incomplete, they may also be detrimental. For in concentrating, as is the manner of such approaches, on examples that are not real and that do not arise out of the individual's actual experience, there is a danger of trivialisation and the fostering of spurious complacency. The individual who has done a course in logic may be tempted to think he is logical - but whether he is capable of being logical depends not upon his being able to recognise a valid syllogism formally, but on being able to reason syllogistically about something (which requires

understanding of subject matter), and whether he is disposed to be logical will depend upon what he has come to take seriously. Value clarification exercises are reprehensible not least because they fail to differentiate between different kinds of values. This can pass by unnoticed only on the assumption that what matters is giving an account of what one's various values are and why one holds them. But if we are anxious to promote competent attempts to justify particular value judgements, then we must desire that people come to understand the differing domains of, for example, aesthetics and morality. (As has been pointed out, by Daniels and Hamm, one of the major weaknesses of Values Clarification programmes has been their failure to distinguish between moral values and non-moral preferences)[10].

It is thus apparent that we logically must introduce people to various domains or subject matters, if they are to display critical or creative talent. (That being so, it might in addition be argued that all that is required is to cultivate a critical response to such subject matter). It seems to me that the most significant feature of Hirt's forms of knowledge thesis is not the one he chooses to stress (the tests against experience), but rather the set of particular irreducible concepts that go to define particular areas of human discourse. That is to say, for example, morality works in its own distinctive way, because it is a developed and sophisticated network of thought based upon certain defining concepts. It is of course true that hundreds, if not thousands, of activities or pursuits, such as philately and baseball, may have distinctive concepts (though we should be careful not to confuse distinctive vocabulary with distinctive concepts). But Hirst (and White too incidentally), whatever the problems in their detailed reasoning, are surely correct in recognising an important distinction between activities or forms of thought whose central concepts can be readily enough explained to

the outsider, and those, such as morality, where this is not so. To understand basic moral concepts, one needs to painstakingly get on the inside of moral discourse. Perhaps equally important is the suggestion that we, as educationalists, surely have to make judgements as to the relative importance of different subject matters, and to seek to cultivate critical thinking, creativity, etc., in those areas deemed to be educationally worthwhile. Would it, for example, be more educationally worthwhile to cultivate an industrious, critical, imaginative devotee of Fifties rock 'n roll or an industrious, critical imaginative historian? That seems to me a key question, and it is one that is bypassed by an approach that believes that the curriculum (and good teaching) should be conceptualised in terms of skills. Thus, it neither makes sense to postulate a good critical thinker, without reference to some context(s), nor, if it did, should we be concerned to produce such a being. We require people who think critically about some things rather than others. Similarly, even if it made sense to conceptualise a good teacher exclusively in terms of generic skills, which it doesn't, we should not be satisfied, for what we need are teachers skilled at teaching some things rather than others.

The notion of social skills or interpersonal skills seems peculiarly bizarre. To be sure these are people who may be said to possess what are called "social skills" inasmuch as they are good listeners, have good refusal skills (i.e. can make refusals effectively and graciously), show concern for others and seem caring, or have a good firm handshake. But when these may properly be said to be skills (e.g. the firm handshake) their utility appears to be merely a matter of convention: a firm handshake is a social skill, as opposed to a liability, so long as people judge people well in the light of their firm handshake. Taking one's hat off to a lady or opening a door for her is a skill that one can acquire with minimum of effort, but what one

actually needs to learn or understand is when exercise of the skill will be appropriate. This takes us to the heart of the matter: in general, being sociable, pleasant, etc. (which is presumably what having social skills is primarily supposed to refer to) is a matter of being a certain kind of person and understanding particular people and situations. Ritualistic adherence to rules and performance of specific behaviours, the possession of skills, is not primarily what is required. (It may be true that there is also the problem of people being sorry, who do not know how to apologise. But knowing how to apologise must surely involve more than acquiring certain skills.)

In short people who might reasonably be said to have personal and intellectual "skills" (if the word must be used) are not people who have been trained to perform particular behaviours and formal cognitive operations, but people of a certain character and disposition, well steeped in various particular and important areas of understanding. They are people who have studied particular subject matter in a certain kind of way.

I may here make passing reference to a rather peculiar paper by Jane Roland Martin in which she argues that the curriculum is too concerned with cognitive development and not enough with caring.[11] I will pass over in silence her curious reading of Plato and, by implication, Peters, and her hypothesis that rationality is somehow a male virtue, while caring is a peculiarly feminine virtue. What is of relevance here is her implied assumption that caring is a skill to be taught. In line with the above I would respond that a) caring, to be effective, is dependant on knowledge of various sorts, and b) one has to teach people to care about particular things.

Caring is not a matter of displaying certain behaviours that can be trained and strengthened or improved through practice, as a true skill is developed (although there may be something in the slightly different,

Aristotelian, contention that virtues may "take" in the individual as a consequence of their exercise being called for repeatedly). Or, to put it another way, we surely have no particular interest in people who have caring skills in this sense. What we want are people who do care about other people, and - an important addition - who can make other people feel cared for. The ability to care and to be recognised as caring is surely largely based upon a disposition towards commitment, concern or love, for certain kinds of people in certain kinds of situations, understanding of those various people and situations, and knowledge of the likely consequences of different acts. One does not teach people to care; one cultivates the values, emotions and understanding that enable them to care. Similarly, while there may be some techniques, such as repeating what people say to one, looking directly into their eyes, or remaining silent while they speak, that could be taught and might be called communication skills, the ability to communicate well with people is certainly not sufficiently characterised in those terms, and I would doubt whether we are entitled to regard them as necessary conditions of good communication. Good communicators are those who interest, amuse, relax other people, and so forth; such ability is, once again, the product of being a certain kind of person and having certain kinds of understanding.

If therefore our concern is that people shall be adept at thinking critically in important areas of life, be at ease and an asset socially, care effectively for people, and be able to communicate well, whether we call these "skills" or not, we should not fall into the trap of treating them as skills in the dictionary sense. Seeking to develop these abilities by concentrating on the exercise of critical thought, putatively desirable social behaviours, caring strategies and communication techniques, without embedding these in particular areas and types of understanding and without relating them to commitment to certain values, is incoherent.

To return to the point from which I started, the issue is not whether there are or are not certain behaviours that teachers may adopt whatever the particular situation, and which are properly to be called skills. The issue is whether teaching should be conceived in this way. It probably is appropriate to label something such as the ability to ask different kinds of questions or to state objectives in a certain form as a skill, since, though not physical, they are limited operations, the performances of which can be improved by practice. But teaching, at any rate good teaching, does not consist in the routine performance of such skills. It consists in helping students to respond critically, creatively, enthusiastically, and so forth to certain areas and types of understanding rather than others. To that end, a crucial criterion for assessing the quality of a teacher remains his or her grasp of some worthwhile subject matter.

IV

It may of course be said that it is only I who take skill talk to carry the implications I have drawn attention to in this paper. It is just a facon de parler, and nobody actually thinks about caring, critical thinking and so on in a way substantially different from that in which I do. If that is so, I apologise for wasting the reader's time, though I cannot see much to recommend a new way of talking that invites this sort of misunderstanding. However, I do not believe that it is so. It is my view that many people are drawn to talking in these terms, because they are a party to a dominant trend of our times that sees education and teaching as essentially a scientific enterprise, and that seriously assumes that to teach well is one and the same thing as to employ a finite set of behaviours, while to be successfully educated is likewise to have developed a set of intellectual and emotional behaviours. If this is so, then the logic of the situation does not appear to have advanced much beyond celebrated clashes of some decades ago between those wedded to the idea of faculty psychology and those persuaded of a Rylean view of mental concepts. Those who conceive of the educational enterprise in terms of skills seem to me to be surreptitiously suggesting, whether consciously or otherwise, that one can develop intellectual, emotional and interpersonal ability in much the same way as one develops muscles. It is a way of keeping alive the view that man is essentially no more than a highly sophisticated machine and that human interaction is ultimately to be explained in exactly the same kind of way as the interactions of physical matter. I believe that such a view precisely denies what it is to be human.

Footnotes

[1]Lee S. Shulman, "Those who understand: knowledge growth in teaching", Educational Researcher, Feb. 1986, pp. 4-14.

[2]Ibid., p.5.

[3]See, e.g., Robin Barrow, Giving Teaching back to Teachers, Wheatsheaf, 1984.

[4]Shulman, op. cit., p.8.

[5]Ibid., p. 6.

[6]See Robin Barrow, "Empirical Research: the conceptual factors", Educational Research.

[7]Harlan Lane, The Wild Boy of Aveyron, Allen and Unwin., 1977.

[8]Cornell Hamm, in a most helpful private communication relating to this paper, objects to the juxtaposition of "rational" and "poetic", on the grounds that poetry is also rational. I see what he means, but it nonetheless seems to me peculiar to think of poetry as written in the rational mode. He suggests that I substitute "literal", "discussive" or "non-metaphorical" for "rational". I would, if I could feel comfortable with it!

[9]See, e.g., John McPeck, Critical Thinking and Education, Martin Robertson, 1979.

[10]Roi Daniels and Cornell Hamm "Moral education in relation to values education" in Cochrane, Hamm, Kazepides (eds.) The Domain of Moral Education, Paulist Press, 1979.

[11]Jane Roland Martin, "Redefining the Educated Person: Rethinking the Significance of Gender", Educational Researcher, June/July, 1986, pp. 6-10.