'Free Imaginative Variation' and the Idealization of Meaning: The Loss of 'Wisdom' in Reductive Definitional Teaching

John Roemischer, City University of New York, Retired.

Abstract

The process of enculturation, initially a mimetic matter, was raised to the level of 'the art of teaching' when methodology made its first appearance. As R. G. Collingwood noted in his 1933 *An Essay on Philosophical Method,* it was Aristotle who first proclaimed that "Socrates was essentially the inventor of method." Socrates' philosophical method was his *dialectical/dialogical teaching method*; his interest in unfolding *meanings* through an expansive idealization of presented concepts, and his ironic declaration of personal ignorance, precluded any involvement with Sophistic *teaching-as-debate*. However, with Plato's preference for *truth* over *meaning* hanging over Socrates, Socrates used mathematics as a model; he settled for *definability* rather than *expansive conceptual idealization.* Instead of expanding his use of the allegorical story form, he resorted to a more mechanical teaching method, as in his Geometry lesson demonstrated in Plato's Dialogue, *Meno.* This more mechanical approach to teaching haunts Western Education—the preference for conceptually underdeveloped definitional learning.

It was the later teacher, the non-aristocratic Jesus of Nazareth, who attempted to invest teaching with meaning by an expansive idealization process: his Parable of the Vineyard embraced an implicit critique of the institutionalization of religion and education. Locking 'teaching' into a language of restrictive definitions limits the imagination and restricts the unfolding of Wisdom (*Sophos*)—the recognition that, ultimately, *irrationality is non-existent.* Pervasive school phobia is due to a superimposed demand for unimaginative rationality. As Mary Warnock (1994) noted: "I believe that the current insistence on the primacy of problem-solving in education may lead to a marginalizing of what ought to be at the centre, the imaginative grasp of the continuity of history."

Introduction

Greek *ἵστορ* (histor)--teaching with perspectival imagination

As a culture becomes enmeshed in the economized language of commonplace experience, what the Greeks called the *etymons* of the language, that is, the true or original sense of a term and its variegated offshoots, soon become ghost-like. While, for example, the term *history* has come to mean the recorded story of human civilizations, the Greek root, *ἵστορ* ('histor') is a complex term specifying a process of *inquiry,* of observation or examination, of having perspective. In essence, 'histor' becomes the root that best characterizes the enterprise called 'teaching', and, as luck would have it, a blind poet comes along who 'sees' what others do not yet see; the poet becomes the new teacher of generations of teachers to come. The work of the teacher is to discover some medium for moving beyond the commonplace mentality locked into a definitional, sign-referenced language, to an *idealization* that portrays the imagination as a parabolic enterprise. Homer's Epics still carry the weight of such an instrument of Education. As an *allegorist,*

Socrates understood that *imaginative idealization* was the essential problem of 'teaching'; it served as the basis of his lifelong opposition to the reductionist Sophistic teachers of his day. And, some four hundred odd years later, the remarkable teacher from Nazareth, who made the first attempt to liberate mankind by miraculously transforming the commonplace world, produced a treasure-trove of *parables,* a term rooted in the Greek etymon (πάραβαλλειν—para*ball*ein) for imaginatively swerving past and beyond some commonplace thought; the parable was used for comparative and applicative purposes. Einstein concurred that the birthing of art, philosophy, and science, through *idealized imaginative projections is the supreme task of inventive inquiry:* It is the attempt, through *imagination*, to flesh out the commonplace, to openly expand what seems cognitively closed, to ultimately make the bi-valued reductive distinction, *rational/irrational,* an illusion of premature, non-perspectival closure. Prior to Copernicus, the notion of a world in motion around the sun seemed irrational; however, a shift in perspective made it perfectly rational. In effect, the loss of *'historein*' in American education is more than a loss of 'inquiry'; it is more essentially the loss of an involvement with "free imaginative variations," as Husserl would say, introduced through perspectival teaching. It is the spirit of the allegory and the parable put into service for the edification of what Kant called the Understanding—the structural base of the creative imagination

In the May/June 2013 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the Harvard educator, Jal Mehta, addresses the topic, "Why American Education Fails."

> The U.S. school system bears the imprint of its origins. Created in the eras of the assembly line, it was never intended to push all its students to engage in the kind of complex learning and critical thinking that the twenty-first-century U.S. economy demands. In the intervening years, the country has layered more rules and higher expectations on top of that initial structure, but it has not fundamentally remade teaching into a modern profession. (Mehta 116)

And while he does attempt to give special attention to "What Teachers Know," the result is a three-paragraph intensification of the age-old complaint: not enough integration of the "different sources of information." By comparison, in his relatively brief 116-page book, *Teaching as Story Telling* (1986), Kieran Egan's "Alternative Approach to Teaching and Curriculum in the Elementary School" is substantively revolutionary. Egan would argue that insofar as Mehta and other writers on Education fail to put the *imagination* of children, hence meaningful conceptualization, on the center-stage of teaching, the "cultural universal [that] everyone everywhere enjoys," namely, "story," fails to emerge as the life blood of teaching. The implicit annoyance in Mehta's analysis of American education, in the context of a broader comparative education, is that other nations do not need to face the problem of 'racial diversity' as do American schools. He writes:

> To be sure, the countries that lead the international assessments differ from the United States in many ways, making it difficult to directly import their lessons. Most notably, they are generally smaller and more racially homogeneous than the United States. (Mehta 111.)

And without specifying what many foreign countries "have in common across otherwise very different cultures," Mehta does not attempt to treat the question of racial differences in these "different cultures." The question begged is whether the African-American 'culture' has anything to contribute to American education that would enrich it; the response typically given is that this large segment of the American population has no 'culture' to contribute. To deny the African-American child a projective imagination, in effect, an operationally free capacity for imaginative variations, is to deny the child his/her humanity.

Conceptualizing 'imagination' as the idealized projection of 'meaning':

Egan's response to Mehta's quest, to determine "Why American Education Fails," is 'transcendental' in Kant's sense: citing the work of Levi-Strauss (1966), Egan states: "some people claim that the story form reflects a fundamental structure of our minds" (Egan 2). Furthermore, story form

> is a model for planning teaching that encourages us to see lessons or units as good stories to be told rather than sets of objectives to be attained. It is an organic approach that puts *meaning* center-stage. It is an approach that draws on more adequate principles of learning; principles that use and stimulate children's imagination…This is not a book about how to teach using fictional stories, nor is it about how to tell stories effectively. Rather it is about how to use the power of the story form in order to teach any content more engagingly and meaningfully. (*Ibid*.)

Before taking up Egan's promise to demonstrate how story form, rather than dealing "only with events. . . .can also shape the teaching of mathematics and science to fulfill the aim of meaningful teaching," we need first turn to two of the great teachers of Western Civilization: Socrates' use of allegory and the New Testament parables of Jesus.

With the contemporary school use of "Socratic Circles" in mind, we first need to reflect on Socrates' approach to dialogical/dialectical teaching, since buried in his celebrated approach one discovers an ambiguity that sill haunts Education: His argument against the teaching practices of the Sophists of his time was essentially that they were preparing students to win cases at court and, through *eristic* argumentation, make worse cases seem better—in effect, to pursue knowledge for one end, namely, to win *debates.* And it is this notion, that the ultimate test of Education is whether it serves personal aggrandizement, or national aggrandizement, that is the true underlying value in Mehta's discussion of the failure of American Education; it is this notion that still provides the subliminal drive of the typical school. The result is a reductionist, test-governed curriculum that is oriented primarily toward debate model, of finding answers to test questions; it is the less-than-subtle force that governs teacher-student interactions and objectives. And notwithstanding the important place that the role of *error* plays in the advancement of understanding, the implicit debate-driven objective is to make students competitive rather than cooperative. Imagine Socrates applying for a local teaching position on the basis of his ironic claim that, in essence, he is ignorant.

But Socrates' effort to move students toward conceptual understanding, toward concretization of abstractions, fell short of the mark: his attempt to do so through the use of allegory was too little and too late. Plato seduced him into thinking that the one way of avoiding the idiosyncratic/Sophistic approach to truth through debating conquests was if thinking mathematically could become his teaching model. In his *dialogical* quest for the *meaning of concepts,* Socrates' (and later Hegel's) 'dialectical reasoning' was, unlike 'debate', collaborative and integrative. In his 1933 *An Essay on Philosophical Method,* R. G. Collingwood noted that Socrates, however ironic it might seem, used mathematics as a "model for dialectical reasoning." This means that in his quest for conceptual elaboration, Socrates simply asked his students to provide a "definition as it exists in mathematics" (Collingwood, pp.92ff). With the use of allegory receding into the background, the ultimate result was the destruction of the Homeric spirit of narration that was replaced by Socratic teaching. Tragically, philosophy left literature behind and for two thousand years, perhaps until Sartre appeared in the 20th century, went out on its own in search of the terminal 'Absolute' that would finalize all inquiry. It would take over four hundred years after Socrates for Jesus to emerge as a 'parabolic' teacher, and two thousand years for the open range of the literary novel to emerge as an instrument of teaching.

Little wonder, then, that in his *Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative thinking in Middle and High School* (2005 47), Matt Copeland goes to the trouble of formally outlining the differences between Dialogue and Debate. Copeland was on the mark when he recognized that debate is still the underlying essence of the typical classroom: In essence, teachers and students, instead of collaborating, actually "oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong." And there is so much more, it almost seems endless—especially as we measure our lives in terms of the years spent surviving school. How revealing language is when we note that in the American idiom, a "collaborator" is, historically, an "enemy"—or better still, a "friend of an enemy"!

Copeland's list of characteristics is extensive: Dialogue is "finding common ground"; the goal of Debate is "winning". (No wonder Ron Van Houten, in his approach to "learning through feedback," created a stir when he attempted to mitigate the significance of competitively grading students.) But there is much more: "Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position," while in Debate the point is to "critique the other position." "In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other position"; in debate one searches for "flaws and weaknesses in the other position." There is "depolarization" of positions vs. "polarization." There is "flexibility" vs. "rigidity." There is, however, at least one shortcoming in Copeland's schematic view: His notion that 'dialogue' is a process of "synthesis", while 'debate' is "analytic" by design, shortchanges 'dialogue'; 'dialogue' is as much a process of analysis as it is of synthesis. Furthermore, Copeland's outline of 24 characteristics of these two approaches to teaching method does not touch the broader base—the erosive impact some of these practices have on the intellectual and social development of children. On the other hand, it can easily account for the pervasive phobic reaction many children have to mathematics (and school generally).

What is the basis of the child's resistance? And what is ultimately lost in the fray? Kant can account for the child's resistance; Coleridge can account for what is ultimately lost. In her 1994 *Imagination and Time,* the Oxford scholar, Mary Warnock identified Kant's unique contribution to this discussion—the establishment of the imagination as a transcendental condition of human consciousness:

> Kant distinguished between the empirical and the *a priori* imagination. The empirical imagination was able to fill our minds with images, which particular images depending on what we each individually happened to have experienced in our lives. The *a priori* imagination, on the other hand was, he held, the same for all of us. (Warnock 13)

This innate human capacity to 'schematize' reality through the built-in categories of the understanding is the work of the imagination. And it is this view of the imagination that underwrites Kieran Egan's transcendental view of the universality of story—a transcendental condition largely neglected in the very concept of 'schooling', a neglect that fails to put "*meaning* center-stage" in the typical classroom:

> The story form is a cultural universal: everyone everywhere enjoys stories. The story, then, is not just some casual entertainment: it reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience. Indeed some people claim that the story form reflects a fundamental structure of our minds (Levi-Strauss, 1966). Whatever the case, it is clear that children are readily and powerfully engaged by stories. (Egan 2.)

In essence, *imagination provides a projected perspective and anticipation of the whole of some affair.* The perception of this perspective and anticipation is what we mean by *meaning*: Art and science become possible; means and ends make practice rational; history becomes open to construction; while human experience becomes reconstructible (cf. John Dewey's *Reconstruction in Philosophy*.).

After reflecting on Coleridge's reference to a "secondary imagination" in his attempt to account for artistic creation, Warnock attempts to connect imagination to *time, story* and *education,* all three vitally connected to the developmental nature of childhood:

> The greatest enemy of imagination is to be locked in the present. It is easy for everyone, but especially for children, to think that things have always been as they are now, and that at the moment of our coming in to the world and becoming conscious of it, all institutions, all customs, all scientific theories, all standards of taste and behavior, were immutably fixed. . . .I therefore regard the teaching of history as central to education….*I believe that the current insistence on the primacy of problem-solving in education may lead to a marginalizing of what ought be at the centre, the imaginative grasp of the continuity of history.* (*Ibid,* 174, italics added.)

Warnock's reference to "the primacy of problem-solving," however, needs to be expanded: the rational approach to determining what is a problematic situation in fields of study and the formation of hypotheses is not the same as engaging in endless *exercises* (called problems) for skill development. In an expanded sense, "problem-solving" is a vital part of the work of the imagination: here, the imaginative projection is not merely the sum of its parts.

We can now fully characterize *imagination* as a process of *idealization,* that is, a process of projecting versions of the *whole* of things or events, as in the use of *metaphors*, of *history*, of *story-telling*. Imagination, in Husserl's phenomenological method, is identified as "free imaginative variations." (Cf. Schmitt 141.)

> Here, Warnock's concluding observation is prescient: The importance of this story-telling cannot be exaggerated as part of education. I believe. for example, that it is central to a child's education that he should learn the stories of religion (and especially in this country of the Christian religion). not just because they form part of that historical culture of which I have already spoken, but because they stand as metaphors of values that the child may thereby come to understand and share….Equally, the child must learn to tell himself the story of his own life; to understand the significance of what he remembers, and to articulate it.…He must learn to give his life a shape, as all story-tellers do, not live it unreflectingly, like other animals. (*Ibid*. 189.)

The Parables of the Nazarene teacher:

In the Gospel of St. Mark, Jesus repeats several times the most important question a teacher can ask: "Do you understand?" And when he performs a preternatural miracle, he requests that his disciples not broadcast these feats. His mission was a rather different sort of miraculous undertaking: to advance humankind through teaching the message of unification through divine love; the secular miracle in his story was his success in spreading borderless brotherhood. Notwithstanding the popular use of parables in Judaic Palestine before Jesus, it is a rare teacher who could extemporaneously produce hundreds of "words of wisdom" and parables that advanced understanding through the idealizations of imagination. And notwithstanding Geza Vermes's querulous comment, in his scholarly *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus* (2003, xiii), "that the hundreds of maxims ascribed to Jesus, some of them directly contradicting one another cannot have originated with the same teacher," in its worldly mission the voice of Jesus was a consistent idealization of one great story, the story-teaching alluded to by Warnock viz., that the Christian journey was the dedication of one's life to the welfare of others.

While the factor of 'space' and its formalization through geometry governed Greek metaphysics and psychology, the developmental temporalization of ontotheology through the birth and death of Jesus constituted a transformation of the Classical idealization process through the Christian imagination: From his recorded narratives, to his 'words of wisdom' and also his parables, Jesus worked life of mankind into and through a *story time-frame* involving a comprehensive ontoethical perspective. Thus in the "words of wisdom," the future tense projects the coming of the Kingdom of God: "All things hidden *will be* disclosed." "Judge not, that you

be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce *you will be judged*, and the measure you give *will be* the measure you get." In such stories as "The parable of the sower," past and future are connected in an eschatology that is predictive: salvation at the end of the world is governed by how seeds are sown in life. It's significant to note that, in Geza Vermes's view, the parables, as full stories, were meant to stand on their own feet rather than be seen as exercises in Biblical exegesis: "allusive though they are by nature, the Gospel parables were expected to speak for themselves." (*Ibid.* 174.) This would seem to indicate that the freedom provided by story telling is an effect of the liberation from dependence on literalist theistic ideology often resisted by Jesus. The parables "all end up by focusing on a single religious or moral counsel, and colourfully exhort the addressees to embrace the attitude or perform the act commanded by the story." (*Ibid.* 175.)

Once again, Mary Warnock's cautionary remarks were prescient: The surgical removal of the study of Religion in the name of democratic governance has ironically left a story-less vacuum in the lives of politically advanced societies. But the search for the miraculous still goes on, still entices us and fascinates the child. The significance of the miraculous in Jesus' teaching was essentially to avoid the human tendency toward commonplace, if not murderous, provincialism.

Provincialism—the enemy of perspectivist teaching:

With no mention of the contribution of Religion to education through story telling, Kieran Egan recognizes that the magnificent use of surprise provided by the element of the miraculous in story has been rendered sapless. In his attempt to revive it, and thereby conquer the tendency toward experiential 'provincialism', Egan seems to reinvent Jesus' Parable of the Sower in modern dress. And with tongue-in-cheek intended, one might try to find the substance of the old parable in Egan's claim that "the supermarket [should not be seen] as a routine prosaic aspect of community life, but as one of the wonders of the world. . . .Provincialism is education's first and most tenacious enemy. This [Egan's story model] builds in principles to help us combat taking the world for granted. In this case the *supermarket* is seen as a miracle of human ingenuity and organizational skill. To properly grasp that miracle it has to be seen in the context of the threats to its achievement and continuation." (Egan 47.) (Note the supermarket basis of the metaphoric reference to Jesus as the "redeemer.")

In essence, 'provincialism' is the product of a narrowing teaching/learning experience, one in which 'free imaginative variations' (cf. Edmund Husserl on method) of conceptual thinking process is sacrificed for reductive, rigidly defined social objectives. Warnock's critique is correct: children for whom the historical context of Religion is defined out of academic existence, who lack the range that provokes them to grapple with the 'miraculous' in Christianity as against the 'miracle of the supermarket,' will never fathom the exponential dimensions which terms like 'Religion' introduce. For most children, the broad connotative possibilities of language are sacrificed for a literal, denotation-bound reading intelligence. Most teachers, and therefore most students in American schools, do not know about what the Greeks would have called the

'etymons' of Modern English—the idealization of meaning through the hybridization of a language that consists of a plethora of historical stories. American statesmen are sent abroad whose language provincialism, as in Roman times, conceivably adds to the arrogance of control through linguistic conquest.

"**Humanizing" mathematics through the *idealization of meaning:***

One of the most puzzling questions in the philosophy of mathematics education is whether its fearsome abstractionism, the cause of much student "mathephobia", can ever be "humanized"—that is, whether its seeming preponderant abstractionism can be mitigated. Though aware of Progressivism's attempt to tie mathematics to the experience of the child, Egan attempts to provide an *idealization of meaning* not merely through problem-solving activities, but through reference to human history:

> Mathematics is not an inhuman activity. People made it for human purposes. The key to humanizing it, or, better, rehumanizing it for children is to tie the computational tasks back to the human intentions, hopes, fears, etc. that generated them in the first place. If children can see a particular solution to a particular human hope, intention, fear. or whatever. then we can embed the skill in a context that is meaningful. (Egan 77.)

Egan's approach to the conceptual idealization of meaning is to turn children into 'rubricators'—that is, to lead them to quickly draw a rubric from their innate passion for stories. This is designed to avoid the popular tenor, namely, that mathematics is the endless memorization of definitions. What makes any story exciting is, at least, the absence of the laborious requirement for memorization of its design elements. In story, it is the governing, easily detected rubric of *binary opposites* that brings heuristic order to the reading. These opposites create the suspense and dramatic motion of stories; they are, in effect, the driving mechanisms of stories. "Humanizing" elementary concepts in mathematics is one and the same as quickly recognizing the process in terms of reasoning as a general human facility. As Egan notes, it takes no stretch to recognize that "Our number sense is intuitive, but counting is learned. A number of species share with us a number senses, but only humans have invented elaborate tricks for counting." An example is the story about the crow that was eating the farmer's grain. When the farmer approached the barn, the crow would fly back to its nest in the tree. It was not until the farmer added up to five friends to the barn, then having them leave, that the crow would fly back, and get shot by the farmer still hiding in the barn. It would not be difficult, Egan points out, by hiding a bunch of marbles in her hands and having children try to guess how many she is holding, that a teacher can quickly demonstrate what it is that differentiates children from crows. (*Ibid.* 79.)

Egan's introductory remarks and conclusion express the general purpose of this paper: The "dominant model" used in typical classrooms, the "objectives—content—methods—evaluation model," the model that generally moves from "active manipulation" of materials to "symbolic conceptualization," is "derived from educational research and theorizing that has

almost entirely ignored the power and educational use of *children's imagination*." (*Ibid*. 1, italics added.)

There is a concluding message buried in this paper, one directed at the question raised in the beginning, viz., what is the "failing model in American education?" First, and foremost, the American infatuation with materials must change—that is, it needs to be noted and assimilated that *materials don't teach; teachers teach!* Second, that the terms 'teaching' and 'educating' are reminiscent of the story of the crow and the farmer: lacking a capacity for an *expansive imaginative idealization of meaning*, crows and most other animals can be *taught*, they can *learn* mimetically, if in no other way*;* however, lacking language, they lack a noetic capacity for comprehending the expansive relationship of the whole as against its parts—that is, they cannot be *educated.*

References:

Collingwood. R.G. (1933). *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.

Copeland, Matt. (2005). *Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in Middle and High School.* Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.

Egan, K. (1986). *Teaching as Story Telling: An Alternative to Teaching and Curriculum in the elementary School.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mehta, Jal. (May/June 2013). "Why American Education Fails." *Foreig Affairs* (Volume 92, Number 3, pp. 105-116.)

Vermes, Geza. (2009). *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus.* London: The Folio Society.

Warnock, Mary. (1994). *Imagination and Time.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy