The verb ‘to teach’, and its irregular past participle ‘taught’, go back to Old English, with the meaning to show, to instruct, to impart knowledge. This implies another person, or other people, who are being instructed. Teaching cannot be carried out without learners – whereas learning can be carried out without teachers.

Teachers do not have to be paid professionals. Babies and young children are taught by their parents to talk, and to take part in numerous activities. Children are taught all kinds of things (desirable and otherwise) by other children. Ever since Plato, there has been an argument as to whether society should pay a special class of professionals to teach, train and socialise its children. Plato certainly believed there should be such an officer, and he is generally counterposed to the eighteenth-century revolutionary, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was the first to believe that education should be a process of natural absorption and should follow the rhythms of a child's interest in the world.

In schools today, teachers are urged to use a variety of ‘teaching styles’. This is to ensure that pupils are kept interested and busy. Styles include different techniques for discussion, asking questions, group work, drama and role play, and, nowadays, different approaches using the interactive whiteboard. The craft of teaching, usually in this case by professionals, is also referred to as pedagogy. Teachers are trained in skills and techniques, but the way they deploy these can make teaching an art (as described in the introduction to this book).

The meaning logically intrinsic to the concept entails that for anyone to be said to be teaching, it must follow that someone else is learning. Moreover, as is said in the introduction, while teaching certainly has its special collocations of techniques, it is, at its most resourceful, an art, which is to say the expression of creative power and its communication to other people. Naturally, practice only rises to the level of art on occasions, and teaching may often be routine, drilled, repetitive, and is invariably tiring. But it is an intrinsic and life-giving human activity, and to be honoured accordingly.

FURTHER READING


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