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The Art of Teaching a Skill
or, The Skill of Teaching an Art

by Andrew Pudewa

MORTIMER ADLER, IN HIS *PAIDEIA PROPOSAL* calling for a return to a classical curriculum, points out one of the major problems of modern education: the confusion of Information, Ideas, and Skills. While Information (facts) is primarily learned through memorization and can be assessed on a percentage-success basis, Ideas are different—they are infinite and can't be easily assessed with the same mechanical right-or-wrong method. "What percentage of the concept of inflation do you understand?" is a nonsensical question, since the concept of inflation could be studied for a lifetime. Discussion is essential for the development of understanding of ideas and concepts.

He goes on to point out that learning a skill is even more different; it can't be developed either by memorization or by discussion. It must be practiced. And the modern problem is that we often try, especially in schools, to teach everything like it's Information, since that's what's easiest to assess, and then we end up teaching to the test. The skill of teaching concepts through discussion and the art of teaching skills through coaching can both be easily lost somewhere between the Scantron® form and the PowerPoint file.

My professional training and background is in music. I spent the first half of my adult life as a full-time teacher of violin and young children's music classes, so I am acutely aware that coached practice is the key to developing the skill of playing an instrument. Others may have experience in dance or sports, cooking or fine arts—things that humans do, and can only learn by doing. Often we link the idea of artistic activity with creativity and self-expression, but here again we are infected with a modernism that actually impedes the development of skills. "If it's creative, it's good; if it's good, it has to be creative," is the dominant mantra so evident today—a tragedy so often outplayed in the fine arts departments of most universities, where the way to an *A* is not to draw or paint or sculpt something beautiful, but to do something that no one else has ever done before, no matter how ugly or grotesque.

This, of course, won't work too well in music. Imagine a method of teaching where we give the student a violin and with cursory directions on how to make a sound, encourage him to "be creative" and "express himself." The result won't much resemble music. Twenty years ago, I wrote an article entitled "Why Music May Save the World," explaining that we music teachers were holding the line, defending the bastion of common sense against the onslaught of deconstructionist modernism attacking the arts.

When teaching music, we prescribe a graded repertoire for the student, and model for him exactly the way to play the pieces. We do this for years, gradually increasing the technical complexity of the material until the student has a solid foundation of basic skills. Then it is appropriate and effective to introduce creative ideas such as interpretation, improvisation, and composition. This should also be the basis for the teaching of writing, a similar artistic skill.

I often hear a well-meaning parent or teacher say to me, "I just want my kids to be able to express themselves in writing." However, the truth is different: Writing is not so much about expressing oneself as it is about expressing ideas. Possibly, we may someday be fortunate enough to have an original idea worth expressing (It hasn't happened to me yet, since I'm pretty sure every idea I've ever had came from somewhere else.), but until then we should practice the skill of writing the way we practice and become excellent in many skills—through imitation and repetition.

Throughout most of history, the arts of language have been taught through memorization and recitation, reading and copywork. Imitation is critical. Even well-known authors like Benjamin Franklin, Jack London, and Somerset Maugham recorded the benefits they obtained through the practice of trying to imitate existing good writing and re-present already well-organized ideas.

So I welcome you to our institute, where we provide materials to assist parents and teachers in helping their students develop an excellent foundation of skills by using models, methods, and checklists. Our approach to teaching composition is not only very old (Think ancient rhetoric.), but is more effective than most anything you will find today. We have received literally thousands of letters and messages from parents of students who have used the IEW system for a few years. They usually score well above their peers on standardized assessments, enjoy writing much more than they used to, win essay contests and scholarships, head into the SAT or ACT with confidence, and write papers which win the acclaim of their university professors. These stories are as common among those who struggled as they are from others.

The irony is both sad and beautiful. When originality and creativity are esteemed above all else, basic skills decrease and true artistic expression becomes impossible; however, when basic skills are taught in an appropriate and effective

way, creativity flourishes. We at IEW are working hard to restore the lost art of teaching composition, providing tools and techniques you can give to your children so that they will indeed be able to speak and write clearly and confidently in a world that so desperately needs them to do so.

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