THE MIMETIC TRADITION

We turn to the “mimetic” tradition first not because it is any older or any more important than the one called “transformative,” but principally because it is the easier of the two to describe. In addition, it is closer to what most people today seem to think education is all about. Thus, presenting it first has the advantage of beginning with the more familiar and moving to the less familiar. Third, it is more harmonious with all that is thought of as “scientific” and “rigorous” within education than is its competitor. To all who rank that pair of adjectives highly, as I do myself, there is an additional reason for putting it first.

This tradition is named “mimetic” (the root term is the Greek word mimesis, from which we get “mime” and “mimetic”) because it gives a central place to the transmission of factual and procedural knowledge from one person to another, through an essentially imitative process. If I had to substitute another equally unfamiliar word in its place, with which to engage in educational debate, I would choose “epistemic”—yet another derived from the Greek, this from episteme, meaning knowledge. The first term stresses the process by which knowledge is commonly transmitted, the second puts its emphasis on the content of the transaction. Thus we have the “mimetic” or the “epistemic” tradition; I prefer the former if for no other reason than that it places the emphasis where I believe it belongs, on the importance of method within this tradition.

The conception of knowledge at the heart of the mimetic tradition is familiar to most of us, though its properties may not always be fully understood even by teachers committed to this outlook on teaching, for this reason it seems essential to say something about its properties.

First of all, knowledge of a “mimetic” variety, whose transmission entails mimetic procedures, is by definition identifiable in advance of its transmission. This makes it secondhand knowledge, so to speak, in the pejorative sense of that term, but simply in that it has to belong to someone first before it can belong to anyone else. In short, it is knowledge “presented” to a learner, rather than “discovered” by him or her.2

Such knowledge can be “passed” from one person to another or from a text to a person; we can thus see it as “detachable” from persons per se, in two ways: It is detachable in the first place in that it can be preserved in books and films and the like, so that it can be “owned” by all who originally possessed it. It is detachable, second, in the sense that it can be forgotten by those who once knew it. Though it can be “possessed,” it can also be “dispossessed” through memory loss. Moreover, it can be “unpossessed” in the sense of never having been “possessed” in the first place. A corollary of its detachability is that it can be “shown” or displayed by its possessor, a condition that partially accounts for our occasional reference to it as “objective” knowledge.

A crucial property of mimetic knowledge is its reproducibility. It is a property that allows us to say it is “transmitted” from teacher to student or from text to student. Yet when we speak of it that way we usually have in mind a very special kind of process. It does not entail handing over a bundle of some sort as in an actual “exchange” or “giving.” Rather, it is more like the transmission of a spoken message from one person to another or the spread of bacteria from a cold-sufferer to a new victim. In such instances both parties wind up possessing what was formerly possessed by only one of them. What has been transmitted has actually been “mirrored” or “reproduced” without its ever having been relinquished in the process.

The knowledge involved in all transmissions within the mimetic tradition has an additional property worth noting: It can be judged right or wrong, accurate or inaccurate, correct or incorrect on the basis of a comparison with the teacher’s own knowledge or with some other model as found in a textbook or other instructional materials. Not only do judgments of this sort yield a measure of the success of teaching within this tradition, they also are the chief criterion by which learning is measured.

My final remark about knowledge as conceived within the mimetic tradition may already be obvious from what has been said. It is that mimetic knowledge is one not limited to “bookish” learning, knowledge expressible in words alone. Though much of it takes that form, it also includes the acquisition of physical and motor skills, knowledge to be performed in one way or another, usually without any verbal accomplishment whatsoever. “Knowing that” and “knowing how” is the way the distinction is sometimes expressed.3

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2 Aristotle once remarked that “All instruction given or received by way of argument proceeds from pre-existent knowledge” (“Posterior Analytics, Book I, 71a). By this he meant that we must begin with major and minor premises whose truth is beyond dispute before we can move to a novel conclusion. This is not quite the same as claiming that all knowledge is secondhand, but it does call attention to how much of the “known” is properly described as having been “transmitted” or “passed along” to students from teachers or teacher surrogates, such as textbooks or computers.

3 For a well-known discussion of that distinction, see Gilbert Ryle, The Concept of Mind (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949).

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Here then are the central epistemological assumptions associated with the mimetic tradition. The key idea is that some kind of knowledge or skill can be doubly possessed, first by the teacher alone (or the writer of the textbook or the computer program), then by his or her student. In more epigrammatic terms, the slogan for this tradition might well be: "What the teacher (or textbook or computer) knows, that shall the student come to know."

How might the goal of this tradition be achieved? In essence, the procedure for transmitting mimetic knowledge consists of five steps, the fourth of which divides in two alternate routes, "a" or "b," dependent on the presence or absence of student error. The series is as follows:

Step One: Test. Some form of inquiry, either formal or informal, is initiated to discover whether the student(s) in question already knows the material or can perform the skill in question. This step is properly omitted if the student's lack of knowledge or skill can be safely assumed.

Step Two: Present. Finding the student ignorant of what is to be learned, or assuming him or her to be so, the teacher "presents" the material, either discursively—with or without the support of visual aids—or by modeling or demonstrating a skillful performance or some aspect thereof.

Step Three: Perform/Evaluate. The student, who presumably has been attentive during the presentation, is invited or required to repeat what he or she has just witnessed, read, or heard. The teacher (or some surrogate device, such as a test scoring machine) monitors the student's performance, making a judgment and sometimes generating a numerical tally of its accuracy or correctness.

Step Four (A): (Correct performance) Reward/Fix. Discovering the performance to be reasonably accurate (within limits usually set in advance), the teacher (or surrogate device) comments favorably on what the student has done and, when deemed necessary, prescribes one or more repetitions in order to habituate or "fix" the material in the student's repertoire of things known or skills mastered.

Step Four (B): (Incorrect performance) Enter Remedial Loop. Discovering the student's performance to be wrong (again within limits usually established in advance), the teacher (or surrogate) initiates a remedial procedure designed to correct the error in question. Commonly this procedure begins with a diagnosis of the student's difficulty followed by the selection of an appropriate corrective strategy.

Step Five: Advance. After the unit of knowledge or skill has been "fixed" (all appropriate corrections having been made and drills undertaken), the teacher and student advance to the next unit of "fresh" instruction, returning to Step One, if deemed necessary by the teacher, and repeating the moves in sequential order. The sequence of steps is repeated until the student has mastered all the prescribed knowledge or until all efforts to attain a prescribed level of mastery have been exhausted.

In skeletal form, this is the way instruction proceeds within the mimetic tradition. Readers familiar with cybernetic models will readily recognize the five steps outlined as an instance of what is commonly referred to as a "feedback loop" mechanism, an algorithmic device equipped with "internal guidance circuitry."4

Which teachers teach this way? Almost all do so on occasion, yet not all spend an equal amount of time at it. Some teachers work within the mimetic tradition only on weekends, figuratively speaking, about as often as a "do-it-yourself-er" might wield a hammer or turn a wrench. Others employ the same techniques routinely on a day-to-day basis, as might a professional carpenter or mechanic.

Which do which? That question will be treated at some length later in this chapter, where I will take up the relationship between the two traditions. For now it will suffice to observe in passing what is perhaps obvious, that teachers intent upon the transmission of factual information, plus those seeking to teach specific psychomotor skills, would more likely use mimetic procedures than would those whose conception of teaching involved educational goals less clearly epistemic in nature.

What might the latter category of goals include? To answer that question we must turn to the second of the two dominant outlooks within educational thought and practice, which I have chosen to call: