

The Limits of Teaching Skills

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By Alfie Kohn

We are in love with skills. Not any specific skill, mind you, but the very idea that children's problems can be remedied by teaching them skills. The model is so simple and familiar to us that we do not even think of it as a model. It is just common sense that people who thrash about in the water need to work on their swimming skills. Likewise, we assume, if children do not pay attention to what someone else is saying, they could benefit from some remedial work in listening skills. If they fail to lend a hand to a fellow human being in distress, they need to hone their helping skills. If they are reluctant to stand up for themselves, they are candidates for assertiveness training.

But along comes early childhood specialist Lilian Katz to remind us that most kids already know how to listen; what they sometimes lack is the inclination to do so. (In many classrooms, they have to do altogether too much listening, but that's another story.) Along comes Ervin Staub, an expert in altruism, to suggest that we should be less concerned with giving people instructions on how to help others and more concerned with fostering a "prosocial orientation" – that is, a *disposition* to help. And along comes Robert Deluty at the University of Maryland with research showing that submissive kids as well as aggressive kids are usually able to describe the appropriately assertive way to respond to any number of situations. In other words, they know how to be assertive; the question is why they aren't.

The Question of Motivation

None of this is meant to suggest that skills do not matter, or that many students might not derive some benefit from becoming more skillful in all sorts of endeavors. But even where this is most obviously true, such as learning how to read and write, the question of motivation may still be decisive. Children who are excited about what they are doing tend to acquire the skills they need to do it well, even if the process takes a while. When interest is lacking, however, learning tends to be less permanent, less deeply rooted, less successful. Performance, we might say, is a by-product of motivation. (The implication is that we ought to be spending our time making sure classrooms preserve and enrich kids' *desire* to learn. The call for "higher standards," which typically skips over the question of how students feel about what they are doing, would thus seem to be fatally misguided.)

Now consider attempts to promote respect and responsibility. Our first obligation is to think about how these words are being used. When some educators complain that children are "disrespectful," what they mean is that children talk back rather than doing what they are told. Similarly, it often turns out that a "responsible" student (or one who "takes responsibility") is one who unthinkingly complies with an adult's demand. Students are typically expected to follow the rules regardless of whether the rules are reasonable and to respect authority regardless of whether that respect has been earned. Given these connotations, I would argue that the most pressing question is not how we can make children more respectful or responsible, but whether these, as currently defined, are even legitimate goals.

But let's assume we have in mind a more reasonable, less autocratic understanding of respect and responsibility. Once again, we find ourselves facing the limits of a skills-based approach. Most students know how to treat someone respectfully. What we want to find out is why they sometimes fail to do so. Apart from simple carelessness, one logical explanation is that they do not feel respected themselves. One is struck repeatedly by the number of adults who criticize children for acting disrespectfully – all the while setting an example of precisely what they are complaining about: they talk at students rather than listening, fail to take students' needs and points of view seriously, try to control students' behavior by dangling rewards in front of them or threatening them with punishments, and make little or no effort to involve them in decision making.

More than Modeling: Creating a Climate for Respect

It is widely understood that people learn by example. But adults who are respectful of children are not just modeling a skill or behavior, they are meeting the emotional needs of those children, thereby helping to create the psychological conditions for children to treat others respectfully. I once visited a kindergarten classroom where the teacher, about to begin a class meeting, paused to ask whether it was OK to erase a childish scrawl on the blackboard. It is the accumulation of such small gestures of respect that create a climate where kids are inclined to act likewise – with the teacher and with each other.

Another example: A high school math teacher suggested that it might be time for a test on Friday, and the students objected that they were not ready. His response was to ask when they would be ready, and after some discussion they decided to take the test the following Wednesday. Many teachers would assume that asking their students to suggest a good time for a test would prompt a sarcastic response such as "Never!" But these students would not think of answering that way for the simple reason (as one of them explained to me) that their teacher respected them.

Teach Responsibility by Giving It

By the same token, if we want students to act responsibly, we have to give them responsibilities. We have to provide them with a classroom where they are encouraged and helped to make decisions. If students are unable to weigh the arguments carefully, anticipate long-term consequences, or take others' needs into account, that may mean they need help figuring out how to do these things. They may have little experience making meaningful choices. Indeed, the same paradox appears: many of the teachers and parents who grumble that kids "just don't take responsibility" spend their days ordering kids around – as though children could learn how to make good decisions by following directions. But once again, the question is not just whether we have taught children a list of relevant skills, but whether we have worked with them to create an environment where their needs and preferences matter, where their voices are heard and valued.

What "Teaching Skills" Helps Us Ignore

Why, then, is there such a disproportionate emphasis on teaching skills? First, this way of thinking implies that it is the students who need fixing. If something more complicated than a lack of know-how is involved, we might have to question our own practices and premises, which can be uncomfortable. Moreover, a focus on skills allows us to ignore the structural elements of a classroom (or school or family). If students insult each other, it is easier for us to try to make each student act more courteously than it is to ask which elements of the system might have contributed to the problem. Practices such as awards assemblies and spelling bees teach students that they must triumph over each other to be successful. Indifference to others' needs – or even active efforts to put each other down – may be rational responses to a dysfunctional system.

But it is obviously more convenient for us to address each individual who says something insulting than it is to track down the structural contributors to such behaviors. (Likewise, it is less ambitious and more conservative to teach children the skills of "dealing with" competition than to figure out how to eliminate competitive practices. The status quo has no more reliable ally than the teacher of coping skills, because whatever is to be coped with is treated as something to be accepted rather than changed.)

Second, a skills-based approach is compatible with behaviorism, whose influence over our schools (and indeed all of American society) is difficult to overstate. Behaviorism dismisses anything that cannot be reduced to a discrete set of observable and measurable behaviors. This dogma lies behind scope- and-sequence approaches to teaching reading as well as other segmented instructional techniques, but its footprints are also discernible in character education, classroom management, and virtually the entire field of special education.

Consider two children in separate classrooms, each of whom gives away half his lunch to someone else. The two behaviors are identical; the two children are evidently both skilled at helping. But why did these kids share their food? The first one, let us imagine, was hoping the teacher would notice and shower him with praise. ("What a nice thing to do, Robert! I'm so proud of you for sharing like that!") The second child neither knew nor cared whether the teacher saw – he gave away some of his sandwich because he was worried that his classmate might go hungry. Virtually all of us are more impressed by the second child's motive, but a preoccupation with behavior – and, by extension, with skills – distracts us from attending to motives.

Replication Is Not Commitment; Recitation Is Not Understanding

Put these two factors together (an emphasis on fixing the child and a focus on behavior) and you have what might be called the transmission approach to learning. Here, academic instruction is construed as a matter of pouring facts into empty containers, while character education involves transmitting values to – or instilling them in – passive receptacles. The emphasis on skills is reassuringly consistent with this model. We know how to do something, and we transfer this knowledge to a student so he or she can do it, too. To some extent this transaction may be successful. We may be able to get students to replicate an action (making eye contact while speaking) or recite an algorithm ("To divide by a fraction, flip it upside-down and multiply"). But replication does not imply commitment, and recitation does not mean understanding.

What's more, the student may be able to do something, but may not want to do it. And this brings us back to where we started. The management theorist Douglas McGregor once remarked that corporate executives like to dangle money in front of their employees because – well, because they can. They have control over how much people are paid, whereas they cannot control how people will feel about their work, and whether they will want to do it, and why. Likewise, we educators gravitate to the things we can do something about, things like teaching skills. Unfortunately, that process can be of only limited use when it comes to helping children become altruistic or assertive, responsible or respectful.

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