There Is No Best Method—Why?

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This paper examines the possible substance of a statement, often heard but rarely explained, in the discussion of language teaching, namely, that there is no best method. Three possible explanations of the statement are discussed, based on a broad interpretation of the term *method:* (a) that different methods are best for different teaching contexts; (b) that all methods are partially true or valid; and (c) that the notion of good and bad methods is itself misguided. The first two explanations are shown to be unhelpful; the third is discussed in some detail, with an exploration of the concept, teachers' *sense of plausibility.*

It is uncommon these days to have a sustained discussion on language teaching without someone at some point declaring that there is no best method, or words to that effect. Such a declaration usually occurs at a late stage in an indecisive debate about different methods, and has the general effect of altering the orientation of the debate itself, somewhat abruptly. It also carries the ring of an incontrovertible statement—or a statement so tolerant and reconciliatory in spirit that to dispute it would be professionally churlish. As a result, one rarely sees a detailed examination of what it might mean to say that there is no best method.

I think it helpful to see the statement as having an illocutionary as well as a propositional meaning. As an illocutionary act, it seeks to terminate a debate without reaching any substantive conclusion, and it does so not by admitting defeat in the effort to reach a conclusion, but by appearing to raise the debate itself to a higher level, thus helping to save professional face all round. It suggests not just that proponents of different methods agree to disagree, but that they give up their pursuit of agreement and disagreement as being unproductive. It manages to reconcile conflicting views by defining a position to which all can honorably subscribe, and by striking a philosophical note on which enlightened discussion can properly end. It is thus a convenient device for legitimizing nonresolution of methodological issues.

The propositional content of the statement, on the other hand, calls for a great deal of clarification and substantiation, in terms of the sense in which a method can be considered good, the reason why no method can be thought or shown to be better than others, the consequence of that position for the theory and practice of pedagogy, the revaluation it demands of the assumptions currently underlying conflict and debate between methods, and the forms in which debate or discussion may still be of use from the new perspective. What is involved is not just the termination of a discussion, but the beginning of a new one—or rather the beginning of a new phase in the discussion, as a positive outcome of the earlier phase. It is this propositional content of the statement that is the concern of this paper; I hope to clarify the sense in which there can be said to be no best method of language teaching.

First, however, a word about the term *method.* I use the term inclusively, to refer both to a set of activities to be carried out in the classroom and to the theory, belief, or plausible concept that informs those activities. The reader will thus find one or both of these aspects the focus of particular parts of the discussion. I consider this "global" interpretation of the term appropriate to analysing a statement that is equally global in spirit.

There are, I think, three general lines of argument that can be advanced in support of the statement to be discussed. These are examined in turn.

IT ALL DEPENDS ON THE TEACHING CONTEXT

If those who declare that there is no best method are asked why, the most immediate and frequent answer is likely to be "Because it all depends," meaning that what is best depends on whom the method is for, in what circumstances, for what purpose, and so on. That there is no best method therefore means that no single method is best for everyone, as there are important variations in the teaching context that influence what is best. The variations are of several kinds, relating to social situation (language policy, language environment, linguistic and cultural attitudes, economic and ideological factors, etc.), educational organisation (instructional objectives, constraints of time and resources, administrative efficiency, class-size, classroom ethos, etc.), teacher-related factors (status, training, belief, autonomy, skill, etc.), and learner-related factors (age, aspirations, previous learning experience, attitudes to learning, etc.). There have been several attempts to categorize such variables systematically and comprehensively (e.g., see Brumfit, 1984), but even the brief and random listing above shows that they

are at different levels of generality, as well as of discreteness and tangibility. Moreover, recent and current work in the field seems to be adding new factors and categories to the inventory, in the form of varied learning styles, communication strategies, personality factors, and psychological processes. Together with slightly earlier work on variations in learners' needs and purposes, this seems to suggest that variability on such dimensions is infinite, thus strongly challenging the notion that any given method can be good for everyone. "It all depends," and what it depends on is a vast number of things.

Notice, however, that to say that no single method is best for everyone is also to say that different methods are best for different people—or for different teaching contexts. This implies that, for any single teaching context, there is in fact a method that is best and, further, we are able to determine what it is. If we are unclear or in disagreement about what method is best for a specific context, there is need for discussion, debate, and interaction between differing perceptions; we should be seeking to further pedagogic debate rather than to terminate it with a face-saving formula. It is perhaps not without significance that statements like "There is no best method" are made most often as defensive postures-as ways of saying not only that one does not agree with what is being argued, but that one refuses to engage any further in the argument. Such statements succeed in preserving the conversational peace, but cause a loss of the productive potential of professional debate. For such statements to act as a contribution to debate, we will need to interpret them as proposing only a narrowing of the scope to some single teaching context, so that dependencies between contextual variables and methodological options might be explored, and a search for the best method might be continued with greater focus. The statement that there is no best method would then be an assertion, not of the futility of looking for the best method, but of the desirability of asking what method is best for some specific context; contextual variability would serve not as a means of avoiding methodological issues, but as a possible new approach to resolving them.

I think it is important to realise how complex it can be to determine dependencies between contextual factors and instructional methods. To begin with, many of the factors that are discussed are neither easy to identify nor simple to assess: They tend suspiciously to fit different slots in different taxonomies. *Formal environment,* for instance, may refer to classroom learning, as against learning through social exposure, or to the formal school system, as against private language instruction, or to relative

formality in teacher-learner relations, as against informal relations, or even to teacher-fronted activities, as against group work among learners. *Motivation* may mean anything from future career ambitions, to a desire for group approval, to a passing interest in a particular classroom activity. What are identified as attitudes are seldom clear-cut or unmixed or even stable. When we come to factors like preferred learning styles, sociocultural influences, or personality factors, we are faced with unclear and overlapping distinctions, and are therefore forced to simplify and stereotype, often in preconceived ways. Further, even when some contextual factors are clearly identifiable, their consequence for instructional procedures can be far from clear. Do older learners need a different method of teaching from younger ones, and if so, how fundamentally different? Is a change in method more likely to succeed in the hands of experienced teachers, or less? If there is a mismatch between official language policy and learners' personal goals, which should have what weight in the choice of an instructional method? If we identify certain learning strategies that learners naturally tend to employ, do we conclude, for that reason, that they are good learning strategies? If not, are learners likely to learn more by following their own strategies, which may be less than good in our view, or by adopting strategies we consider more conducive to learning, though they may go against such natural tendencies? If earlier experience has conditioned learners or teachers to certain perceptions of learning and teaching, does that constitute an argument against change, or indicate a greater need for change?

The point I am making is not just that our knowledge is uncertain at this time; the more important point is that it is only when we can show a relationship between a contextual factor and a methodological decision that the contextual factor becomes significant for pedagogy. What we need is not just an identification and projection of variation but, equally, some way of determining which form of variation matters to instruction and how, and which does not. If we look for variation merely on the assumption that the teaching context matters for teaching methodology, we are sure to find indefinite variation on many dimensions, thus making it impossible to justify any instructional method for any single group of learners. If all physiological variation among individuals (including finger-prints) were assumed to call for matching differentiation in medical treatment, no medical practice would be justifiable.

It is, of course, possible to obviate the problem of relating contextual factors to instructional methods by giving contextual factors a central role in pedagogy and treating instructional methods as a kind of logical derivation from them. This is the move

often advocated: from a preoccupation with teaching methods to an effort at "curriculum development" or "course design." The assumption is that, with such a move, decisions concerning methods will either be rendered unnecessary or play only a small part in the enterprise. As one applied linguist puts it, "The important issues are not which method to adopt but how to develop procedures and instructional activities that will enable program objectives to be attained" (Richards, 1985, p. 42). The procedures envisaged are those of situational analysis, needs analysis, analysis of "authentic" samples of target language use, surveys of opinions and attitudes, estimates of resources, etc.—that is to say, compilations of different kinds of information about learners, teachers, the school, and the society, with a view to determining instructional objectives. Instructional procedures are seen to follow, or be easily determinable, from the profile of contextual factors and the statement of objectives. This is, in effect, a kind of discovery procedure for methods: That method is best, it seems to say, which results from a careful implementation of the procedure, the soundness of the method being guaranteed by the soundness of the procedure leading to it.

There is, however, a price to pay for this simplification of pedagogy. The instructional procedures most directly derivable from a specification of needs, wants, and objectives are those of supplying to learners the relevant tokens of language, or getting them to rehearse target language behaviour in simulated target situations. Any concept of developing in learners a more basic capacity for generating tokens of language when needed, or for adapting to unforeseen target language behaviour as necessary, leads one toward ideas about the nature of language ability and the process of language acquisition—complex methodological issues that the discovery procedure seeks to avoid. Besides, a more elaborate analysis of contextual factors results in a correspondingly larger set of criteria to be met by instructional content or procedure, and the larger the set of criteria to be met, the fewer the choices available in meeting them. Language instruction that attempts to cater directly to social objectives, learning needs, target needs, learners' wants, teachers' preferences, learning styles, teaching constraints, and attitudes all round can end up as a mere assemblage of hard-found pieces of content and procedure—a formula that manages, with difficulty, to satisfy multiple criteria and therefore cannot afford to let itself be tampered with. What sets out to be a widening of attention to varied educational considerations can thus end up as an abridgement of choice and flexibility in the practice of pedagogy. In avoiding adherence to a single method, one will have arrived instead at a single, fixed, teaching package.

Avoiding adherence to a single method has a certain ideological aura to it. It suggests liberation from a monolithic mould, a refusal to be doctrinaire, an espousal of plurality. It is, however, also a denial of the role of understanding in language pedagogy, which is necessarily a matter of ideation: We understand something when we have a set of ideas or principles that cohere to make up a conceptual model, or theory. Although theory is only an abstraction, it is about the only instrument we have (at any rate, the most accessible instrument) for making sense of complex phenomena and conveying that sense to one another. Theory, as we know, arises not from a cataloging of diversity, but from a perception of unity in diverse phenomena—a single principle, or a single system of principles, in terms of which diversity can be maximally accounted for. If the theories of language teaching (that is to say, methods) that we have at present fail to account sufficiently for the diversity in teaching contexts, we ought to try to develop a more general or comprehensive (and probably more abstract) theory to account for more of the diversity, not reject the notion of a single system of ideas and seek to be guided instead by diversity itself. Pointing to a bewildering variety of contextual factors as a means of denying the possibility of a single theory can only be a contribution to bewilderment, not to understanding.

There is also the fact that a concentration on dissimilarities between teaching contexts is likely to obscure similarities between them; in the case of language learning, we are dealing with a human ability that constitutes a defining characteristic of the species. It is true that variations in social situation, institutional organisation, individuals' histories, attitudes, or intentions can all have the effect of limiting or extending opportunities for desired forms of pedagogic action. However, to imply that they call for a matching differentiation in pedagogic theories is to make the very large claim that the process of language acquisition—a basic human attribute—itself varies according to contextual factors.

THERE IS SOME TRUTH TO EVERY METHOD

I have discussed in some detail one form of substantiation of the statement that there is no best method, namely, that different methods are best for different teaching contexts. A different form of substantiation is also heard fairly frequently, namely, that there is some truth (or value or validity) to every method—or, at any rate, to several different methods—even though the methods may be conceptually incompatible. This, as we know, is an argument for eclecticism in language pedagogy—not an argument that different

contexts should use different methods, but an argument that the same context should use a number of different methods, or perhaps parts of different methods. There is an immediate appeal to common sense in this stance: If every method is a partial truth, then it seems clear that none represents the whole truth; to adopt any single method is to settle for much less than one can get by adopting all or several of them.

As a comment on our state of knowledge at this time (or indeed at any time), the suggestion that no method contains more than a partial truth is clearly unexceptionable. We continue to engage in the professional activity of research, concept development, discussion, and debate because all of our understanding of language learning and teaching is at best partial, and for any of us operating with a theory, which can represent only a partial truth, it remains entirely possible that other theories represent partial truths as well. However, this philosophical perception of imperfect knowledge does not help us to see which theory represents which part of the truth—or which part of a given theory represents the truth. Were we able to see that, we would no longer be operating with a theory of which only a part is known to represent the truth, and missing those parts of other theories that are known to represent other parts of the truth. Our knowledge would make a leap toward the whole truth— whatever that might mean. The fact, however, is that the understanding one has of a phenomenon at a given time—the theory one is operating with—represents for one the whole truth. Other theories are true to the extent they share the understanding represented by one's own theory. In this sense, each theory can claim to represent the partial truths of other theories: If there is an overlap of understanding between it and certain parts of other theories, then it can be said to contain those parts of other theories that constitute partial truths.

But the statement that there is some truth to every method needs to be seen not just as an epistemological observation, but as a plea for an eclectic blending of all or several methods. Now, any such blending of different methods is either done with a perception of what is true about each method, or it is done without any such discrimination. If there is a perception of which part of what method is a partial truth, then that perception constitutes a theory, which happens to have an overlap of understanding with various other theories. It therefore represents a method, which is like any other method, with an overlap of understanding with others. There is no reason to think, on the strength of its being a blend, that it has any more of the truth than any other method. It is simply one of the methods that share some of their concepts or procedures with other

methods; how much of the truth it represents is a matter not of how much blending it does, but of what particular perception makes the blending possible. What we have, therefore, is not an eclectic blend, but a different method—or else, all methods which happen to have partial overlaps with others are equally eclectic.

If, on the other hand, an eclectic blending of different methods is done not with any particular perception of what parts of those methods represent the truth, but rather in the hope that whatever is true about them will be captured in the blending, then the eclectic blend does not constitute a method, but instead an act of gambling or a hedging of bets: It can only have treated all parts of different methods as being equally likely to be true or untrue, and, as a result, there is as strong a possibility of its being a blend of the untruthful parts of different methods as there is of its representing the truthful parts (whatever notion of truth and untruth we may care to employ). Further, such indiscriminate blending of methods adds nothing to our pedagogic understanding, since it offers no perception of what may be true about which method. It simply plays it safe—as safe from truth as from untruth. An eclectic blending that constitutes a form of pedagogic understanding at least offers us an additional method, though it makes an unjustified claim to being more than an additional method; an eclectic blending that does not constitute an additional method in that sense leads us away from any furtherance of understanding, while offering us a chance at what may be called "truth by accident."

WE NEED TO RETHINK WHAT "BEST" MIGHT MEAN

Let me now turn to a third possible way of substantiating the statement that there is no best method. This is that we have no adequate notion of what "best" might mean—or that the notion of good and bad needs to be reexamined and clarified.

A prevalent notion of the best method is that it is the method that yields the best results in terms of learning outcomes. Since the aim of all teaching is to bring about as much learning as possible as quickly as possible, it seems self-evident that teaching methods should be judged by the amounts of learning they can lead to, in a given period of time. This appears to call for a comparison of methods and a quantification of learning outcomes, through well-designed, controlled experiments, in keeping with the spirit of objective, scientific enquiry. It is true that such objective evaluation is so difficult to implement that all attempts at it in the past have resulted in a wider agreement on the difficulties of doing an evaluation than on the resulting judgement on methods. It is also

true that arguments have been put forward for a possible alternative to the experimental design. Nevertheless, we generally continue to assume, more or less consciously, that there is a method that is objectively the best, that it is in principle possible to demonstrate that fact, and that once demonstrated, the superiority of the best method will lead to its widespread acceptance in the profession. That is to say, we generally see ourselves as working to that ideal, on the tacit premise that what is unrealised is not necessarily unrealizable, and that all our professional endeavour is a form of progress toward it. Alternatives such as trying to construct comprehensive descriptions of methods—as "illuminative" evaluation (Parlett & Hamilton, 1977)—involve an abandonment of that ideal, thus threatening to disorient our professional thought. We prefer to retain the ideal as the basis of all our professional effort.

Seen in this context, the statement that there is no best method is a questioning of the current concept of the best method—an argument that the ideal of objective and conclusive demonstration is not only an unrealised one, but an inherently unrealizable one, and that working with such an ideal is unproductive for the pedagogic profession. Brumfit (1984), for instance, has strongly questioned the notion that teaching methods, which are essentially concerned with human interaction, can usefully be subjected to the processes of objective testing and prediction, which are part of the scientific method. He argues, in summary, (a) that a teaching method in operation is necessarily an embodiment of certain general pedagogic principles into a variety of specific contextual features (including participants' psychological states); (b) that predictive testing of a method demands manipulation and control of the manifold contextual features; (c) that many of the contextual features are either difficult or impossible to control; and, most important, (d) that any success actually achieved in controlling contextual features will have only the effect of disembodying the method, as it were, of its actual, operational form, thus rendering the outcome of the testing inapplicable to the operation of the method in any specific context. Brumfit comments:

A claim that we can predict closely what will happen in a situation as complex as [the classroom] can only be based on either the view that human beings are more mechanical in their learning responses than any recent discussion would allow, or the notion that we can measure and predict the quantities and qualities of all these factors. Neither of these seems to be a sensible point of view to take. (pp. 18-19)

While Brumfit's argument is based largely on the complexity of the pedagogic operation, it is also possible to point to the

complexity of assessing language attainment as such. Examining aspects of this latter complexity further underscores the futility of attempts to objectify method evaluation. To begin with, an important consideration for language teaching methods is the quality of learning to be promoted, as distinct from the quantity. The question of quality has been a recurrent concern for the profession through the ages, being conceptualised and verbalised variously as grammar in contrast to practice, knowledge in contrast to skill, explicit knowledge in contrast to implicit knowledge, accuracy in contrast to fluency, learning in contrast to acquisition, ability to display in contrast to ability to deploy, etc. There may be disagreements about how the different kinds of knowledge or ability are related to each other, but it is remarkable how, whenever a distinction is made between different forms of knowledge of a language, it is the less conscious, less observable, and less quantifiable form that is seen to be of greater value or validity. Objective evaluation of methods, however, necessarily relies on a quantification of learning outcomes, and therefore tends to measure the more quantifiable form of knowledge. This means that the more objective the evaluation is, the less likely it is to assess learning of the desired quality, and vice versa.

Second, a perception of language ability as an implicit form of knowledge is linked to a perception of its development as an internal, unobservable process that is organic rather than additive, and continuous rather than itemizable. This means that at any stage of the growth process, there is not only the growth achieved so far, but a potential for further growth achieved as a part of it—a potential that can be thought of in terms of inchoation or incubation. Our most ambitious effort at language testing can only hope to give us evidence on the actual growth achieved at the stage of testing, not on the potential generated for further growth, since knowledge in an inchoative state is even less accessible to elicitation and quantification than implicit knowledge as such. Again, not everyone in the profession may regard knowledge of a language as being equally implicit in nature or organic in its development, but the point is that an objective evaluation of methods is unlikely to be able to cope with concepts of implicitness and inchoation and, as a result, unlikely to provide widely acceptable decisions.

Third, an objective evaluation of methods is not just an assessment of learners' language attainments; it also involves an objective attribution of the learning that has taken place to the teaching that has been done. However, the relationship between language teaching and language learning becomes less and less direct as one perceives language as being an implicit ability and an internal

development: What is less conscious and less observable is also less directly teachable. The more indirect the relationship is between teaching and learning, the more difficult it is to attribute any specific piece of learning to any specific piece of teaching. It is, ultimately, difficult to tell what learning has taken place as intended by the teaching, and what has taken place independent of it (or, indeed, what in spite of it). We have problems enough maintaining a subjective perception of general causation between teaching and learning in the development and discussion of particular methods. An evaluative comparison of different methods calls for a degree of objectivity and specificity in cause-effect relations that may well be unreasonable to expect in the field of language pedagogy.

More generally, the notion behind an objective evaluation of methods is that there is something in a method that is by itself—independent of anyone's subjective perception of it—superior or inferior to what there is in another method. If some method were shown by such evaluation to be superior to all others, then that method would be expected to benefit all (or a large number of) classrooms, regardless of how it is subjectively perceived by the different teachers involved. A method, in this view, is a set of procedures that carries a prediction of results; the fulfillment of the prediction depends only (or mainly) on an accurate replication of the procedures, not on any perceptions of those who do the replication—rather in the way the replication of a procedure in chemistry yields the predicted result, regardless of the chemist's thoughts or feelings about it. No doubt the idea looks fairly absurd when put in this form: It reduces teaching to a faithful following of highly specified routine—something of a pedagogic ritual. I am, however, unable to see how a serious pursuit of objective method evaluation can be sustained without some such idea. The only alternative to it is to maintain that the method that is shown to be objectively superior will somehow carry with it the subjective perception that lay behind its development and, equally, that the perception concerned will then replace the differing perceptions of all the teachers who may be led to adopt that method on the strength of the objective evaluation. This implies, among other things, that teachers' pedagogic perceptions are as easily replaceable as classroom procedures, an idea that could hardly be less absurd.

It is useful to ask why it looks absurd to suggest that a good teaching method can be carried out, without loss, as merely a routine. We find it necessary to think of good teaching as an activity in which there is a sense of involvement by the teacher. When we encounter an instance of really bad teaching, it is most often not a

case of the teacher following a method with which we disagree, but rather of the teacher merely going through the motions of teaching, with no sense of involvement. When a method considered to be good has been implemented on a large scale and later thought not to have "worked," an important part of the reason identified has been that teachers followed the method "mechanically," with no sense of understanding or identification. Indeed, the more "efficiently" a method is implemented (that is to say, with all possible measures to ensure that teachers will carry out the procedures envisaged), the more likely it is that mechanical teaching will turn out to be the main impediment to success.

Perhaps, then, there is a factor more basic than the choice between methods, namely, teachers' subjective understanding of the teaching they do. Teachers need to operate with some personal conceptualisation of how their teaching leads to desired learning— with a notion of causation that has a measure of credibility for them. The conceptualisation may arise from a number of different sources, including a teacher's experience in the past as a learner (with interpretations of how the teaching received at that time did or did not support one's learning), a teacher's earlier experience of teaching (with similar interpretations from the teaching end), exposure to one or more methods while training as a teacher (with some subjective evaluation of the methods concerned and perhaps a degree of identification with one or another of them), what a teacher knows or thinks of other teachers' actions or opinions, and perhaps a teacher's experience as a parent or caretaker. Different sources may influence different teachers to different extents, and what looks like the same experience or exposure may influence different teachers differently.

The resulting concept (or theory, or, in a more dormant state, pedagogic intuition) of how learning takes place and how teaching causes or supports it is what may be called a teacher's *sense of plausibility* about teaching. This personal sense of plausibility may not only vary in its content from one teacher to another, but may be more or less firmly or fully formed, more or less consciously considered or articulated, between different teachers. It is when a teacher's sense of plausibility is engaged in the teaching operation that the teacher can be said to be involved, and the teaching not to be mechancial. Further, when the sense of plausibility is engaged, the activity of teaching is productive: There is then a basis for the teacher to be satisfied or dissatisfied about the activity, and each instance of such satisfaction or dissatisfaction is itself a further influence on the sense of plausibility, confirming or disconfirming or revising it in some small measure, and generally contributing to

its growth or change. I also think that the greater the teacher's involvement in teaching in this sense, the more likely it is that the sense of involvement will convey itself to learners, getting them involved as well and helping to create that elusive but highly regarded condition in the classroom: teacher-learner rapport. It is of course possible that other factors have a role, too, in the creation of rapport, such as learners' own perceptions of learning and their interpretations of the teaching activity (Allwright, 1984). My point is that an engagement of the teacher's sense of plausibility is a major condition for classroom rapport, whether or not it is the only condition. It is common to hear that learning is enhanced when learners enjoy classroom activity, but enjoyment is a broad notion and is often equated with some form of light entertainment interspersed with more serious activity. I think there is a form of enjoyment arising from teacher-learner rapport that is less conspicuous but more integral to classroom activity, and more truly productive of learning.

The picture of classroom activity that engages the teacher's sense of plausibility is no doubt closer to an ideal than to a factual description of much of the teaching that actually goes on. But that does not detract from the suggestion I am making, namely, that that ideal is more worth our while to pursue than the notion of an objectively best method. The question to ask about a teacher's sense of plausibility is not whether it implies a good or bad method but, more basically, whether it is active, alive, or operational enough to create a sense of involvement for both the teacher and the student. Mechanical teaching results from an overroutinisation of teaching activity, and teaching is subject to great pressures of routinisation. It is, after all, a recurrent pattern of procedures on regularly recurrent occasions. It is also a form of recurrent social encounter between teachers and learners, with self-images to protect, personalities to cope with, etc. And, like all recurrent social encounters, teaching requires a certain degree of routine to make it sustainable or even endurable. There are, in addition, varied feelings of adequacy or confidence among teachers, varied degrees of concern for maintaining status, stress of overwork, threat of peer comparisons or of expectations from superiors, etc., all of which can use the protection offered by role-defining routines. More fundamentally, there is the fact that learning by learners is essentially unpredictable and, consequently, it is an unacceptably high risk for teaching to have to justify itself in direct relation to learning: There is need for a way to claim that the teaching expected has been performed, though the learning expected may still not have occurred; and teaching defined as a routine precisely meets that need.

An active sense of plausibility is very difficult to maintain among such pressures on routinisation, and can easily become frozen, ossified, or inaccessibly submerged, leaving only a schedule of routines. When teachers profess to believe in some method they have been following—perhaps to the point of swearing by it—they may well be merely demonstrating how frozen their sense of plausibility is and, as a result, how insecure they feel against a threat to their teaching routines. When a teacher's sense of plausibility is active and engaged in the teaching, it is necessarily open to change, however slowly or imperceptibly, in the process of the ongoing activity of teaching. Such teaching can perhaps be regarded as being "real," in contrast to teaching that is mechanical. We can then say that a distinction between "real" and mechanical teaching is more significant for pedagogy than any distinction between good and bad methods. The enemy of good teaching is not a bad method, but overroutinisation.

If it is important for a teacher's sense of plausibility to remain alive and therefore open to change—not frozen but fluid in some degree—then an important goal for the pedagogic profession is to seek ways in which the sense of plausibility in as many teachers as possible can be helped to remain as alive as possible, though necessarily in varied forms. It is true that the ongoing activity of teaching is itself a source of continual influence on a teacher's sense of plausibility, thus helping to keep it alive, but we have noted how the ongoing activity of teaching is, at the same time, subject to varied pressures of routinisation, which can have a deadening effect on the sense of plausibility. A second source of influence on the sense of plausibility—perhaps the most important one outside the classroom—is interaction between different senses of plausibility. This interaction can arise from an articulation and discussion among teachers of one another's pedagogic perceptions, from professional reading or writing, and in other, more or less formal, ways.

A specialist-level debate between different methods is, in fact, an interaction between different senses of plausibility, seeking to exert an influence on all those who participate in it (more or less overtly) through a process of sharing, sharpening, strengthening, weakening, changing, or helping to develop further the different forms of understanding involved. A specialist who advocates a method is on the same footing as a teacher who operates with a sense of plausibility, except that the specialist can be said to have achieved fuller and more communicable articulation of a particular sense of plausibility, perhaps in the course of wider (or longer or more intensive) interaction with other similarly well-articulated perceptions. If ossification is less likely to occur at the specialist's level, it is only to

the extent that the specialist has more of a commitment to professional interaction and is more continually engaged in exploring and articulating some sense of plausibility. The resulting well-developed and well-articulated senses of plausibility (that is to say, methods) have value not as desirable replacements for many teachers' senses of plausibility but for what may be called their power to influence—to invoke, activate, interact with, alter in some way, and generally keep alive—different teachers' differing senses of plausibility, thus helping to promote and enlarge the occurrence of "real" teaching. A method, from this point of view, is not good or bad in any objective sense, but has more or less pedagogic power to influence teachers' subjective understanding of teaching; and debates between different methods are important for the profession because they help to give expression and opportunity to the pedagogic power of different methods.

CONCLUSION

To summarise, if we regard our professional effort as a search for the best method which, when found, will replace all other methods, we may not only be working toward an unrealizable goal but, in the process, be misconstruing the nature of teaching as a set of procedures that can by themselves carry a guarantee of learning outcomes. To say that the best method, in this sense, varies from one teaching context to another does not help because it still leaves us with a search for the best method for any specific teaching context. To say that there is some truth to every method does not help either, because it still does not tell us which part of which method is true. Objective method evaluation has either to assume that methods have value for learning independent of teachers' and students' subjective understanding of them, thus perpetuating an unrealizable goal and reinforcing the misconstruction of pedagogy, or to try to take into account teachers' subjective understanding of teaching, thus ceasing to be objectively evaluative. If, on the other hand, we view teaching as an activity whose value depends centrally on whether it is informed or uninformed by the teacher's subjective sense of plausibility—on the degree to which it is "real" or mechanical—it becomes a worthwhile goal for our professional effort to help activate and develop teachers' varied senses of plausibility. A method is seen simply as a highly developed and highly articulated sense of plausibility, with a certain power to influence other specialists' or teachers' perceptions. Perhaps the best method varies from one teacher to another, but only in the sense that it is best for each teacher to operate with his or her own sense of

plausibility at any given time. There may be some truth to each method, but only in so far as each method may operate as one or another teacher's sense of plausibility, promoting the most learning that can be promoted by that teacher. The search for an inherently best method should perhaps give way to a search for ways in which teachers' and specialists' pedagogic perceptions can most widely interact with one another, so that teaching can become most widely and maximally real.

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