Learning Habits and Teaching Techniques[1]
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Introduction

The supposition behind this paper is that what I shall call "autonomous learning"—by which I mean the ability to think for oneself—is central to the idea of higher education. In one sense such a supposition is, I believe, uncontroversial. As evidence consider the claim, still regarded as important, that a university is, and should always be, a place of freedom of thought and speech. A more telling example, more telling because it testifies not only to the centrality of the notion of autonomous learning to the idea of higher education, but also to the practical contradictions within which this idea is caught, is provided by the current fate of philosophy within the academy. In contrast to most other traditional academic disciplines philosophy, as its name indicates, lacks a distinct subject matter, a realm or region of entities that it studies. Whilst the physicist studies nature or *phusis*, and the biologist speaks of *bios*, or life, the philosopher is simply the lover of wisdom. In an age when the connection between university education, employability, and the creation of wealth has become increasingly important, one would imagine that a discipline which lacking any distinct domain lacks any direct application to the world would be increasingly vulnerable. Certainly, philosophy no longer occupies the privileged place within the University that it did when it was regarded as the "Queen of the Sciences"; without doubt it is no longer identical with the academy as once it was; and there have been some notable recent attempts to close philosophy departments within this country. Yet, post-Dearing, the authors of the *Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy* still felt themselves able to affirm that "philosophy ought to be at the heart of the work of any university worthy of its name",[2] and that because philosophy essentially embodies precisely that disposition to critical self-examination which is integral to autonomous learning.

Beyond the widely shared assumption that the capacity to think, learn and behave autonomously is central to the aims and ideals of Higher Education, however, there is a greater degree of controversy. Some regard that capacity as "an outcome for students in higher education";[3] for others it is a more or less necessary pre-requisite for entry to higher education; for yet others it is a pre-requisite capacity, possessed in germ by the student, and progressively developed throughout the course of their studies by its actualisation. And if it is accepted that such a capacity is developed by higher education, forming a more or less explicit outcome for students, then there is disagreement over how it is best developed.

The claim that I wish to advance in the first part of this paper is that autonomous learning is a disposition, habitually acquired. Since habitual activities are often regarded as thoughtless and unintelligent—activities that are mindlessly repeated—such a claim might seem, at best, paradoxical. However, once it is accepted that habits are not necessarily unintelligent, there are good grounds to understand autonomous learning in such a way.

[2] *Subject Benchmark Statement: Philosophy, 2007* (Mansfield: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2007), p. 2
[3] D. Fazey & J. Fazey, 'The Potential for Autonomy in Learning: perceptions of competence, motivation and locus of control in 1st year undergraduate students' in *Studies in Higher Education*, Volume 26, *No. 3, 2001*, p. 345

Having presented my reasons for this claim, I should like then in the second part of the paper to present for discussion its implications. Some of those implications bear on how we think about teaching as a practise, but perhaps the most important—at least what I see as the most important—relates to what we think the function or purpose of education itself is.

Part I: The Habit of Learning

1.1. What is Autonomous Learning?

In one respect at least, the definition of autonomous learning is uncontroversial: it is the exercise of the capacity to think for oneself. Just as there is little contention over the minimal definition of what autonomous learning is, there is little dispute over how it is recognised. It is generally accepted that the capacity for autonomous learning is recognised by its expression in a number of different forms, such as the ability to understand an argument and set it in context; to search for, read, and understand relevant primary and secondary material; to explain and articulate an issue in oral and written form to others; and to demonstrate an awareness of the consequences of what has been learned.

However, the minimal definition of autonomous learning can support two different views about the issue. One view is that autonomous learning simply and solely constitutes learning that students do for themselves. For those that hold such a view, an autonomous learner is someone who given minimal information would, for example, go away to the library, find sources for themselves and work by themselves. In the discipline of philosophy such work would amount to the student sitting down with a text and trying to come to an understanding of it on their own. Another view, however, and one that significantly contradicts the first, has it that autonomous learning involves showing the student how to do something in such a way that they are then capable of undertaking a comparable activity by themselves (for example, having been shown how to analyse Descartes' works, they can then go off an analyse Hume's).

Significantly, these different views about what autonomous learning is are related to differences in the way in which the practice of autonomous learning is seen to be developed or reinforced. Where it is held that autonomous learning essentially amounts to working on one's own, it follows that fostering autonomous learning simply involves telling students to go away and read secondary texts in order to find out what other people have found problematic about a particular issue or argument. Lectures, and thus the lecturer, fulfil an obvious function in such a model: they provide the student with minimal introductory information, and then send them away to exercise those skills that are the mark of the autonomous learner. Seminars are no less an important aspect of higher education on such a view, but the role of the seminar tutor becomes merely to provoke debate by asking students, 'why do you think that?' On the other hand, according to the second understanding, autonomous learning is a capacity—or better, a disposition—instilled through practice and exemplification: giving the students a model to copy, showing them how to break down and analyse an argument, how to structure an essay, and seeking to inspire them as a role model. On this view, autonomous learning is the exercise of skills, developed and perfected through continuous practice, which come to be second nature. It is, in short, a disposition inculcated through habit. Or, to put it another way, it is a habitual disposition.

1.2. What is habit?

Is there not something paradoxical, even downright wrong, in linking autonomy of learning—the free, unforced, self-reflective exercise of thought—with habit, insofar as habit, construed as the impulsion to continue to behave in the same way, and thus with a sort of mechanical uniformity, is supposed to involve an absence of thought and attention? However, such an

understanding of habit, to say nothing of thought, is itself one that is itself an habitual acquisition, the legacy of the abstractive opposition of mind and body, freedom and necessity, activity and passivity, which is characteristic of Enlightenment philosophy and thought. On this view, habit is essentially corrupting, since through the operation of habit an act or action repeated reduces the active to the passive, the thoughtful to the thoughtless.

Without wishing to repeat here the philosophical critique of Enlightenment thought—a critique that stretches from Nietzsche through phenomenology to Derrida and beyond—it will suffice to say that much, if not all, post-modern philosophy (I use the term in its non-technical sense) refuses modern metaphysics' restrictive identification of intelligence with self-conscious reflection, and freedom with the mental faculty of volition. Action and perception, and not merely contemplation and intellection, are granted an intelligence of their own. This rejection of the prejudices of modern philosophy makes possible an understanding of habit that is closer to that of Aristotle, for whom habit, *ethos*, is the means by which the rational and appetitive part of the soul is directed, that is, educated.[4]

I cannot hope to offer the detailed account or argument that would properly serve to establish these points. Instead, I would like to appeal to an example given by the 20th century French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who did so much to rehabilitate the status of both perception and the body. The example—or better the description—taken from the *Phenomenology of Perception* is that of a blind person's use of a cane, and it will, I hope, suffice to support the claims I have just made about action, perception and habit.

Merleau-Ponty argues that "the acquisition of a habit is [...] the grasping of a significance",[5] and he continues, through habit:

> The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight. In the exploration of things, the length of the stick does not enter expressly as a middle term: the blind man is rather aware of it through the position of objects than of the position of objects through it.[6]

This description makes apparent what we might call the miracle of habit; for through habit the blind man's cane ceases to be an inert object. The prosthetic implement becomes an organ, that is it becomes part of the living body; it is invested with the perceptive intelligence of the body—that vital and attuned instrument of our being-in-the-world, which is endowed with that capacity for apprehension that the phenomenologists called *intentionality*, and which we can here call simply a directedness towards and comprehension of beings.

Of course, it might be objected that this is simply a description of the work of habit at the level of the body and motility, and that at the level of consciousness habit is the great deadener. But to that objection my response would be that what Merleau-Ponty's description makes apparent is an intertwining of intelligence and the body, the body and intelligence, such that neither can be properly understood in abstraction from the other. Thus if habit is the means by which the body contracts a certain disposition, a certain way of being, it must be allowed that it goes all the way up, so to speak; that habit is, in truth, a power that shapes all human faculties, underlying the operations of the understanding and reason as much as those of the muscles and sinews.

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[4] See, for example, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson, rev. H. Tredennick (London: Penguin, 2004), 1103a 12 ff.

[5] M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), p. 143.

[6] *Ibid*

1.3. Habit, Desire and Autonomous Learning

It seems to me that arguing that autonomous learning is a habit of mind is important because it allows us to overcome those prejudices and assumptions that condition us to think of it as an innate ability, which some students have already realised, that others need only to be told about in order to exercise at will, and which still others have only a limited capacity to grasp.

However, it could be objected that what I have said thus far amounts simply to applying a well established distinction between what we might call 'telling that' and 'showing how' methods of teaching to autonomous learning, according to which mere 'telling that' without 'showing how' is nothing more than issuing instructions without instructing, ordering rather than educating. It might also be objected that not only is not much gained by conceiving autonomous learning as an acquired habit, but there is a fundamental incoherence involved in doing so that obscures and confuses things, it being impossible to explain how repetition could instil in a student so vital a capacity as autonomous learning. At the very least, it might be said, the inculcation of the habit of autonomous learning cannot be achieved simply by repetition through practice. Rather, the repetition must itself be undertaken because the student desires to learn independently. In that case, does not conceiving autonomous learning as a habitually acquired disposition at best simply push the problem one stage back, since the student either has the desire to learn independently or does not? In answer to this, it is necessary to recognise that desires and habits are one in the sense that although they are conceptually distinguishable, they are existentially reciprocally dependent: desires inform and motivate habits, whilst habits generate, form, and deform desires. In other words, repetition becomes a habit in the sense that it shapes desire, whilst without the desire the habit will not stick, a point made by Aristotle.[7]

Beyond this, however, it is important to acknowledge that how to stimulate this desire in students is a question to which there are no easy or absolute answers, for the capacity of a teacher to stimulate the desire to learn independently is not itself something that can be taught abstractly. Teaching is a *practical art* acting upon the moment, and not a *theoretical science* concerned with the universal, and it requires that the teacher applies his or her particular skills to specific circumstances. Consequently, the principles of teaching are only general truths, and this is something that shapes the points that I will go on to make. For the moment though, I want only to say that engendering autonomous learning is not a matter of producing the desire to learn independently *ex nihilo*. Although it might be the case that students are increasingly less equipped to learn autonomously when they first enrol at university, and whilst not all students who undertake a degree necessarily do so out of a desire to exercise independence of thought, the majority do. Certainly, this is not an original point[8]—and in any case, it is a point that is scarcely worth contesting, since to do so would imply that there was no good reason to *teach* at university, or to be concerned with how we teach what we teach. If, as is sometimes said, students are nowadays prone to treat their tutors as repositories of information, whose job is to tell them what they need to know, that is perhaps because they have been habituated to treat teachers in such a way by their prior experience, and is not in itself an indication that they lack the desire to learn independently. Indeed, when asked, those students who came directly from A Levels to university often recognise that they have not been sufficiently accustomed to autonomous learning—a recognition that presupposes the desire to develop this disposition.

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[7] Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk II, *passim*

[8] This is a point that has been made elsewhere—see, for example, Lamb and Saunders "What do our Students Really Think?" in Discourse, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 29-44; it is also implicit in the willingness of students to participate in this type of project.

Part II: Teaching Techniques

2.1. Introduction

Thus far I have sought to advance a definite conception of what autonomous learning is: a habitual disposition, a habit of mind, expressed through a range of activities and skills, acquired and developed through practice. This is significant outcome not only for theoretical or philosophical reasons, but because it also provides a basis for understanding and responding to the challenge of instilling independence of learning in students in the current context of higher education.

One of the things that is important about seeing autonomous learning as a habit of mind is that it overcomes the view that promoting autonomous learning entails leaving students to work by themselves. Defined as a habit of mind, autonomous learning is a virtue in the fullest sense of the word—it is both a power as well as an excellence. However, it cannot be classified as what Aristotle terms an intellectual virtue; that is, an excellence of intellection owing its inception and growth to instruction.[9] Instead, it is closer in nature to what Aristotle calls a moral virtue; one that is neither engendered by nature nor contrary to nature, but which we are constituted by nature to receive, and which owes its full development to habituation.[10]

Understood in this sense, the paradox of autonomous learning is the paradox of habit. A habit is not necessarily unintelligent—indeed it can be an expression of the highest intelligence—and yet for all that it is not exercised self-consciously or voluntarily. Autonomous learning—independent thinking—is the highest virtue of the mind, an expression of its freedom, and the necessary condition of all other intellectual virtues, and yet itself is an acquired *disposition*, a second nature, and therefore is neither voluntary nor involuntary.

It follows then that autonomy of learning is not 'teacherless learning'. Teachers have a decisive role to play in inculcating this habit of mind. Certainly it is correct to claim that autonomous learning is "thinking for oneself", but to reduce the definition solely to this claim risks obscuring the problem it involves, since it is precisely that expression that promotes the idea that all one has to do is encourage the isolation and separation of students as if that were equivalent to pedagogical self-reliance.

2.2. Instructional Educational Objectives and Expressive Objectives

The crucial question remains as to how best to inculcate the disposition of autonomous learning. As Aristotle observes, we acquire a virtue by exercising it[11]—builders learn to build by building, swimmers learn to swim by swimming; similarly, students become autonomous learners through the activity of autonomous learning, and they perfect the exercise of this disposition through repetition and practice. In this way, autonomous learning becomes second nature. It follows from this that best practice, underpinned by a coherent encouragement of autonomous learning, is achieved by fostering good habits. In other words, if "like activities produce like dispositions",[12] then the virtue of autonomous learning is fostered by activities that have the requisite qualities.

As I see it, this would entail moving from a *knowing that* to a *knowing how* based programme of learning; that is, a programme of learning founded on, or foregrounding, a set of practically based competencies, and at the same time moving away from thinking about and planning learning in terms of what the educationalist Elliott Eisner called "instructional objectives", and instead recognising the need to think about curriculum activities in terms of

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[9] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a 15
[10] Ibid, 1103a 25
[11] Ibid, 1103 b 15
[12] Ibid, 1103b 20

"expressive objectives".[13] Hopefully, what I go on to say will make clear why the former move also requires the latter, my argument being that without the latter, learning would risk being reduced to a merely mechanical acquisition of competencies.

Let me begin by telling you about what Eisner calls "instructional objectives". In a paper entitled 'Instructional and Expressive Educational Objectives: Their Formulation and Use in Curriculum', Eisner argues that instructional objectives are those which are arrived at by breaking down learning into specifiable elements that can then, theoretically, be delivered in a systematic way with the aim that the student would come out of the course of study in a state of knowing; that is to say, they are should "specify unambiguously the particular behaviour (skill or item of knowledge) the student is to acquire after having completed one or more learning activities".[14]

In my experience, it is in these terms that most academics are required to think about and plan their courses. Properly identified and formulated, and set out in intervals of time appropriate for the students who to acquire them, these objectives are invested with an unimpeachable authority. For they provide the criteria by which the curriculum-maker selects content and identifies the appropriate learning activities and the means by which to test them. Once these objectives have been defined, what content is to be taught, which teaching procedures are to be adopted, which assessment activities used and what criteria to use in grading assessments all follow necessarily.

Eisner articulates a number of criticisms of instructional-type objectives. For example, noting that their authority rests on their supposed pedagogic utility he echoes one of Aristotle's criticisms of Plato's account of the idea of goodness. Just as Aristotle argues that it is clearly absurd to suppose that craftsmen—all of whom aim at a particular good specific to their profession—would abstain from theoretical enquiry into the idea of the good if such knowledge were itself really as potent in practice as Plato assumed it to be,[15] so too Eisner rhetorically asks: "why is it that teachers do not eagerly use tools that would make their lives easier?"[16] Or, is it perhaps he asks, "that the power and utility assigned to objectives [...] are somewhat exaggerated?"[17] Or, floating another possibility—to which I will return—is it the case, he asks, that the basic supposition of such an approach to education just do not accord with some teachers' basic assumptions about education and about people?

Eisner opposes to "instructional objectives" what he calls "expressive objectives". An expressive objective, he says:

> Does *not* specify the behaviour the student is to acquire after having engaged in one or more learning activities. An expressive objective describes an educational encounter: it identifies a situation in which [students] are to work, a problem with which they are to cope, a task they are to engage in—but it does not specify what from that encounter, situation, problem, or task they are to learn. An expressive objective provides both the teacher and the student with an invitation to explore, defer or focus on issues that are of peculiar interest or import to the enquirer. An expressive objective is evocative rather than prescriptive.[18]

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[13] See Eisner, E., "Instructional and Expressive Educational Objectives: Their Formulation and Use in Curriculum", http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/37/e2/25.pdf
[14] *Ibid*, p. 16
[15] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a 5ff
[16] Eisner, E. *op. cit.* p. 2.
[17] *Ibid*, p. 3
[18] *Ibid*, pp. 17-18.

In short, expressive objectives are descriptions of situations in which students explore, try to understand, grasp the point of, feel the enthusiasm of other students in the group about what is going on. The point for Eisner is that the expressive objective cannot have its significance or value expressed in advance; its value emerges from the encounter with it.

For Eisner, expressive objectives have the distinct advantages of being close to the practice of teachers, and of being specific to the situation and to the learner, thereby promoting an active engagement in learning. And for this reason it seems to me that such objectives would best serve to inculcate the habit of autonomous learning. But how might such a way of thinking about learning inform thinking about teaching? Or, to put this question another way, how might teaching practice best be facilitated according to this view of autonomous learning? It has been suggested to me that one way in which it might be facilitated would be by developing a *Handbook of Practices*.[19] Rather than issuing to academics a set of "instructional objectives" or even a set of instructions about formulating "instructional objectives", such a handbook would identify, develop and detail a series of practices appropriate to each stage of an educational programme, building specific competencies through regular practising.

2.3 Education, *episteme poietike* and *phronesis*

In this last, concluding section of my paper, I want to try to articulate a philosophical argument for my suggestion that Eisner's expressive objectives would best facilitate the inculcation of the habit of autonomous learning. To make this argument, and at the risk of repeating something that is well known to most of you, I should like to offer a summary of Eisner's brief history, or genealogy, of the evolution of the concept of "educational objectives" in the twentieth century. Doing so will, I hope, enable me to make clear what I think are the implications of my claims for the way in which we conceive the purpose or function of education *per se*.

According to Eisner, at the beginning of that century, education, along with much else, became subject to the demands of efficiency and performativity. That is, it was subject to the same rationale as industrial processes, and was itself regarded in terms analogous to those processes. Eisner argues:

> Under pressure from local boards of education [...] school administrators tried to protect their positions and to reduce their vulnerability to public criticism by employing methods developed by Francis Taylor in industry in order to improve the efficiency of the school. If the school could be managed scientifically, if the procedures that had been employed so successfully in the production of steel could be used in schooling, education might become more efficient.[20]

As Eisner notes, to effect this transformation it was necessary to establish quantitative and qualitative standards for judging the outcome of the educational process; time and motion studies needed to be made to identify the most efficient means of achieving the desired educational outcome; ideally, the educational process was not only to be standardised but routinised too, in the sense that as little as possible was left to the judgement of the individual "practioners"; and "the tasks to be undertaken were to be divided into manageable units so that they could be taught and evaluated at every step".[21]

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[19] I am indebted to Mike Garfield for this idea, which he put forward in a long and detailed discussion of this paper

[20] Eisner, *op. cit*., p. 4.

[21] *Ibid*.

One might take issue with Eisner's account of the causes and motives that led to the subjection of education to the dictates of efficiency and performativity, and perhaps even to his historical dating of that process. For it seems to me that one could locate the very changes that Eisner identifies in education within the broader sphere of the historical formation of what Michel Foucault has called "disciplinary power", that is, that series of specific techniques and technologies directed towards correcting and normalising behaviour through discipline and training which became historically decisive in Europe in the course of the nineteenth century.[22]

Be that as it may, the important point to note is that the emergence of the concept of "educational objectives" and in particular "instructional-type" "educational objectives" is linked to a productivist conception of education. In this sense, instructional objectives are comparable to what Aristotle called *episteme poietike*—that knowledge or know-how that informs *tekhne*, making or production.[23] What is significant in this regard about the knowledge or know-how that informs technical production is that, according to both Plato and Aristotle, it essentially takes the form of a pre-envisaging of a proto-type that then serves to guide the productive process itself. As Aristotle himself puts it: "things are generated through *tekhne* from the *eidos* in the soul";[24] that is to say, the producer—the potter, let's say—has in mind an image of the product to be produced—the cup or mug—itself envisaged according to the specific function the product is to serve, which image guides her hand in the fashioning of the material into the final form of the thing. Similarly, the educationalist has in mind an idea—an archetype, norm or standard—and the student is fashioned or formed by the process of education to that archetype, norm or standard.

For Aristotle, *episteme poietike* or *tekhne*, is a form of calculative deliberation.[25] It is a thinking about things that are not by necessity but that can be otherwise, since as Aristotle says no-one deliberates about things that are invariable. However, there are, for Aristotle, two types of calculative or deliberative thinking, the second being what he calls *phronesis*, which is often translated as 'prudence' and sometimes as 'practical wisdom'. *Phronesis* is a sort of circumspection or deliberative *concern* over one's own doings. Whereas *tekhne* is a productive know-how—a knowledge relating to making, *phronesis* is a practical wisdom—that is concerned with acting.

But why is it important to distinguish between *tekhne* and *phronesis*? To answer all too briefly, it is because, for Aristotle, the human is never a finished product or article, notwithstanding all talk to the contrary. This *not-being* is not a deficiency, but is rather the distinctive virtue of the human being. The product is a determinate entity: it is conceived and created in accordance with a fixed end, and its being is exhausted by that end. By contrast, the human is an indeterminate being—a point that is captured by the Aristotelian notion of *praxis* or acting as opposed to making: in *praxis* or acting, the end lies in the acting: the deed or action is its own end. In deliberating about acting the deliberator deliberates about him or herself. This deliberation is not originally or primarily a decision made by a reflective subject; it is not an explicit, reflective and judgmental consideration about what to do, but a deliberation that is first of all enacted. In acting we fulfil, or at least encounter the possibility of fulfilling, our highest potentiality.

All that in order to suggest that conceiving of education in terms of "instructional objectives", which are, I think, objectives appropriate to, or conceived according to a process of making, is ultimately unsustainable. Clearly, in view of what I have already said, it cannot be claimed that the human being cannot be thought of as a product, and that education cannot

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[22] See, for example, M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,*
[23] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139b 15ff
[24] *Ibid*
[25] *Ibid*, 1139b 25ff

be conceived of as a process of production. Not only do the accounts of Eisner and Foucault testify to the possibility of so conceiving the human being, but Christian metaphysics itself thought the human as a creature, the product or creation of God. Nor is it the case that I am forecasting the destruction of educational *institutions*—universities will, I think, continue to exist, although in what form is a different question. Rather, the point is that the consequence of such a conception forces such a distortion of education that eventually it becomes untrue to itself—that is, it ceases to be that process that leads the human being to its humanity, and thus to the fulfilment of its essence or *arête*, its specific virtue.

By contrast, to think of autonomous learning as a habit that can be inculcated in accordance with what Eisner terms "expressive objectives" is to think about education as open-ended process in which student and tutor are exposed to a series of encounters, in which the activity and not the outcome is paramount. In this sense, it is true, or truer, I think to the original vocation of education—which is not to fit the individual to a specific function, but to allow them to become what they are—a free and active being. In other words, it is true to the notion of autonomous learning.

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