

“Teaching is so WEIRD”

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Abstract: *Direct active teaching* by parents is largely absent in children’s lives until the rise of WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized rich, democratic) society. However, as mothers become schooled and missionized—like Kline’s Fijian subjects—they adopt “modern” parenting practices, including teaching. There is great variability, even within WEIRD society, of parental teaching, suggesting that teaching itself must be culturally transmitted.

Kline has done a fine job in laying out the various disciplinary perspectives on teaching, but she fails to acknowledge that all three perspectives are mediated by culture. I find two aspects of her argument particularly problematic. First, her definition of teaching is broadened (contrast Thornton & Raihani 2008, p. 1823) to include an enormous range of behavior. In fact, the definition is so broad that it is hardly distinguishable from *social learning*: for example, “Social learning ... refers to any situation in which the behavior, or presence, or the products of the behavior, of one individual influence the learning of another” (Caldwell & Whiten 2002, p. 193).

Specifically, Kline’s catholic definition of teaching includes *teaching by social tolerance*, illustrated by a Fijian woman who permits her child to get involved as she prepares food (see target article, sect. 3.1.1). This is precisely the pattern of behavior that Rogoff and colleagues have been documenting for decades in rural Mexican and Guatemalan villages, and their primary conclusion is that children learn through their own initiative, observing, participating, practicing, and doing, not from being taught (Paradise & Rogoff 2009, p. 117; Rogoff et al. 2003). Perhaps the Fijian mother is simply acceding to the child’s inexorable drive to learn, perhaps she’s just being accommodating to head off a tantrum?

Another “type” of teaching is *opportunity provisioning* (see target article, sects. 3.1.2 and 4.2.2). This would include the frequent accounts of the provision of knives to young children. For example, a Pirahã child:

was playing with a sharp knife ... swinging the knife blade around him, often coming close to his eyes, his chest, his arm ... when he dropped the knife, his mother – talking to someone else – reached backward nonchalantly ... picked up the knife and handed it back to the toddler. (Everett 2008, p. 89)

Again, I would use this case as *prima facie* evidence of parents’ *aversion* to teaching coupled with the bedrock belief – solicited in interviews – (Lancy, in press) that learning is children’s business (e.g., Willerslev 2007, p. 162).

Evaluative feedback is another type of teaching discussed by Kline (sects. 3.1.4 and 4.2.4). A normative reading of the ethnographic record would stress the rarity of feedback – especially praise – from adults (Hilger 1957, p. 77). On the other hand, corporal punishment (Ember & Ember 2005) and affrightment are certainly common enough but it isn’t clear that the intent is to *teach*. A Samoan mother may threaten a fretful baby by calling out “Pig! Elenoa is here, come and eat her!” (Ochs 1988, p. 183). “Evaluative feedback” is largely used to manage the child’s behavior, rather than to transmit the culture.

My larger point is that, unlike *direct active teaching*, Kline’s other types of teaching are more securely and parsimoniously labeled “social learning.”

The second issue is that Kline fails to account for acculturation. She finds that teaching is “common” on Fiji (sect. 4.1, para. 1), but the villagers she queried had had over 100 years’ exposure to Western schooling and missionary influence (Kline et al. 2013, p. 357). In my fieldwork with Kpelle children in the early 1970s where teaching was conspicuously absent, the village inaugurated

its first school during my fieldwork. The Christian congregation was tiny and Muslims even rarer (Lancy 1996). Little conducted a child-focused ethnography among the Asabano, a remote and unacculturated Papua New Guinea (PNG) Highlands tribe. Schools and churches had arrived within the previous 15–20 years. In his observation of children and parents, he saw no teaching. Parents displayed no obligation to encourage children’s learning; to manage their activity; or even to acknowledge, let alone reward, children’s efforts. However, when “asked how their children learn anything, [parents] unanimously answered that they explicitly ‘show’ children in a step-by-step process. Even though they very clearly did no such thing.” Probing further, Little discovered that the resolution to this contradiction lay in the consistent and explicit sermonizing of village pastors regarding the Christian duty of parents to instruct their children. Although parents had not actually changed their parenting behavior, they could parrot the credo and apply it to their own culture (Little 2011, pp. 152–53).

In comparative studies which have focused on this cultural divide, mothers and children with more schooling readily adopt the roles of teacher and student in experimental learning contexts, whereas those with little or no schooling act as if the child will learn autonomously through exploration, observation, and imitation/practice (e.g., Chavajay 2006; Correa-Chavez & Rogoff 2005; Göncü et al. 2000; Paradise & de Haan 2009). Other relevant findings come from Tahiti and Nepal, where acculturated parents adopt “modern” child-rearing practices that emphasize school readiness and developmental milestones as compared to the *laissez-faire* practices of their “old-fashioned” village counterparts (Levy 1996, pp. 129–30; see also Crago 1992, p. 498; Seymour 2001, p. 16). Indeed, in a recent report of a multi-site, multi-nation study, “women internalize the teacher role from their experience in Western-type schools and use it as mothers” (LeVine et al. 2012, p. 139).

Direct active teaching (sects. 3.1.5 and 4.3.1), while rare elsewhere (Lancy 2010), enjoys almost mythic status in what Henrich et al. (2010) refer to as WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized rich, democratic) society, and is a major export – as the LeVine et al survey reveals. So important is teaching in WEIRD society, parents do it even when there is no need, such as teaching kids how to talk or how to play (Lancy 2014). Ironically, even in WEIRD society, parents and professionally trained teachers are not necessarily very good at it. In a study of WEIRD parents teaching their children the game Chutes and Ladders, some parents used effective techniques, others were quite ineffective (Bjorklund 2007, p. 158; see also Bergin et al. 1994). In a recent massive study in the United States, the level of parents’ academic involvement did not predict children’s grades. In fact, “helping with homework” had a negative impact because parents so often botched the job (Robinson & Harris 2014).

From the *culture-based* approach to the study of teaching, the evidence clearly shows that teaching itself must be culturally transmitted – teaching is largely a product of nurture, not nature.

Teaching interactions are based on motor behavior embodiment

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Abstract: In Kline’s target article, the role of motor behavior in teaching is missing. However, it is so important that we cannot avoid taking into account the movements of another person when performing our own movements. Moreover, the state of mind is embodied. Consequently, teaching should integrate the role of motor behavior to enhance teacher/learner social interactions.