

# Beyond Facilitating: The Art of Making Things Difficult

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Too much attention is given to the idea of the teacher as a facilitator and not enough to the idea that an important, and indeed prior, role of the teacher is to make things difficult for learners. What do I mean by this? In order for the teacher to act as a facilitator, the learner first must be in some difficulty, such as being challenged by a task. Learners often find themselves in new and unfamiliar territory, in which case the teacher can step quickly into the role of facilitator. However, as I wish to argue, all this talk of facilitation actually focuses on what I take to be a secondary or peripheral function of the teacher. A better starting point is to think of the teacher as someone who creates difficulties for students, and does so with a purpose. In this paper, I'd like to think this claim through in more detail by arguing that there is an art to making things difficult, and that the art lies, in part, in getting the level of difficulty "just right" in each case. Dewey invokes this idea when he writes that "a large part of the art of instruction lies in making the difficulty of new problems large enough to challenge thought" (*Democracy and Education*, p. 157).

Allied to the practice of teaching as an art of making things difficult is the related idea of knowing when not to talk, and when not to interfere with learning once the student is engaged with a problem. "Doing everything by doing nothing" is the principle that Rousseau recommends teachers to adopt (1979, 119). Strategic silence and inaction help in the maintenance of what might be termed *difficulty management*—the pedagogic art of knowing when to adopt a hands off strategy and when it is appropriate to lend a helping hand. Silence, observes Neruda in his poem, *Keeping Quiet*, "should not be confused with total inactivity."

The art of teaching, then, requires sustained effort from the teacher in achieving a balance between what is new and what is familiar to the learner—a balance in which thought is sufficiently challenged to advance learning without making things too easy or too difficult.

## References

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Free Press.

Rousseau, J-J. (1979) *Emile or On Education*, A. Bloom, trans. (New York, Basic Books).