

Bound to the Mimetic or the Transformative? Considering Other Possibilities

Abstract: Philip Jackson's "The Mimetic and the Transformative: Alternative Outlooks on Teaching" is widely read both inside and outside of philosophy of education circles and courses, and is best known for sketching out the long-standing difference between the mimetic and transformative traditions in teaching. In this paper I argue that we need to move beyond the mimetic/transformative divide and to a new tradition of teaching. I make the case that Jackson's understanding of assessment and adaptive education are unduly limiting, and this is what keeps his thinking bound to a dualism that needs to be reconstructed. Once reconstructed, new possibilities for philosophers of education, teacher educators and teachers are disclosed.

In this paper I revisit what I take to be one of the most influential papers written by a philosopher of education in recent memory, Philip Jackson's "The Mimetic and the Transformative: Alternative Outlooks on Teaching."¹ Jackson's paper is widely read both inside and outside of philosophy of education circles and courses, and is best known for sketching out the long-standing difference between the mimetic and transformative traditions in teaching.² Although Jackson recognizes that almost every form of teaching has aspects of mimesis and transformation, when we think about practices of teaching, one tradition is generally more dominant than the other. Mimetic teaching aims to reproduce or replicate some existing standard and transformative teaching is responsive to the unknown and the unforeseeable in the triangular relationship between student, teacher and subject.³ Instead of leading students to some preordained and foreseen end, transformative teaching aims to free students for possibilities of growth and development that are impossible to determine in advance.

Presciently, Jackson saw that the growing standards and accountability movement—backed by new technologies and a fervent positivistic belief in the power of assessment—would lead to a resurgence in the belief that mimetic teaching should be chosen over transformative teaching. Instead of aiming for amorphous and difficult to quantify goals like moral development or creative experimentation on the part of students, emerging technologies of assessment—with a promise that students could be led to learn anything that could be reproduced—allowed mimetic teaching to dominate the imagination—often driven by fear—of what teaching should be. With a nation's educational system at risk, why work on transformation that is difficult to facilitate and even more difficult to deliver on, when mimetic teaching would allow students to learn what they need to know in order to be productive earners and citizens? This is Jackson's deep concern. A concern that very few people would choose the transformative over the mimetic, and so we might land in the position we are in now, thirty years after Jackson's prophetic essay. Who can doubt that the mimetic tradition of teaching has not become dominant in educational practices? Instead of attempting the difficult work of letting students sit with ambiguity, teachers feel forced to teach to tests. Instead of allowing students the time it takes to develop into who they are meant to—or aspire to—become, students are captured by how well they can game a test and

reproduce what is expected. Examples go on in countless directions. And though many teachers continue to hold onto transformative ideals and find ways to enact them in practice, they often do so through strenuous efforts of will and imagination, and often at great risk to their livelihood.⁴ As Doris Santoro convincingly demonstrates, good teachers are leaving the profession—she evocatively labels them conscientious objectors—because transformative teaching has almost no officially—or politically—valued place in our time.⁵

I return to Jackson's essay not only because of its prescience, but because he begins his essay hoping that the mimetic and transformative traditions might be brought closer together. Instead of choosing between one form of teaching over the other, Jackson hoped that he could—at least conceptually—find a way to bring the best of both traditions together.⁶ As Dewey argues in *Experience and Education*, we shouldn't be forced into deciding between the "old" versus the "new" in education, we should seek what is worthy of the name education. I see Jackson attempting something similar in his essay: instead of choosing between the mimetic and the transformative, he wants us to seek out what is worthy of the name teaching. And, what is worthy of the name teaching can only come about if we move beyond the mimetic/transformative dualism and to our next better attempt at finding—or founding—a tradition of teaching.

Although Jackson begins "The Mimetic and the Transformative" on a hopeful note, the essay ends pessimistically, and understandably so. Jackson is able to imagine and recall individual teachers who find ways to enact what is good in both traditions, the traditions—as traditions—seem fixed in place with the mimetic in the dominant—if not almost exclusive—position. In Jackson's age as in ours, the opportunities for transformative teaching are few and undervalued. As such, I read his essay as something of a call—one especially directed to philosophers of education—to keep the transformative tradition of teaching alive, because it seems nearly impossible—given the hold mimetic teaching has on an imagination driven by fear of America's "failing" schools—to get a hearing for the tradition of transformative teaching. Without this type of hearing, it will be impossible to develop a tradition of teaching that brings together what is good in both the transformative and mimetic traditions. Though he doesn't make it fully apparent that the transformative needs to be defended in "The Mimetic and the Transformative"—he does this in "Facing Our Ignorance"⁷—as readers work through Jackson's essay I find it hard to believe that many would want to be on the side of the Sophists against Socrates, or on the side of the fillers of vessels versus the artists and creators. Maybe unintentionally—or maybe because of the very real pressures poised to choke out the transformative tradition of teaching—Jackson seems to foreclose the possibility of forging a new tradition of teaching that combines what is good in both traditions, because he finds it almost impossible to find a way to enact the transformative in the mimetic era we continue to live in.

It is especially at this point that I find it important to return to Jackson because if he offers little hope of bringing the mimetic and transformative traditions of teaching, doesn't this consign those of us who stand for the transformative tradition to be forever outside of conversations that dominate our educational era? That is, if the transformative tradition doesn't have a voice in the mimetic era we are

living in, where does this leave philosophers of education? If many philosophers of education are on the side of transformative traditions in teaching, and therefore outside of dominant educational discourses, is it a surprise that philosophers of education often wonder about relevance, audience and purpose?⁸ In print and in informal conversations, philosophers of education struggle with the role that we can play in the types of conversation that dominate our educational era. Though it may be—to echo Emerson—great to be misunderstood,⁹ what if there is more to mimetic teaching than Jackson sees? In particular, what if Jackson’s concern that new technologies of assessment that give the mimetic tradition of power its newfound power might be something that can be used to transformative ends? That is, might there be ways for reconstructed mimetic assessments to facilitate the aims of transformative teaching? Answering this question is the main goal of this paper.

To be clear, I certainly don’t believe that transformative teaching should be subsumed to mimetic ones. The mimetic era, guided by narrow visions of assessment and accountability—as countless scholars inside and outside philosophy of education have demonstrated¹⁰—is mis-educative, and we have to do everything possible to reassert the aims of transformative teaching. But, I worry that Jackson doesn’t do enough to work through dissolving surface differences between the mimetic and transformative traditions in teaching, and this is tied to his too narrow view of assessment and its role in teaching.¹¹ Again, Jackson was importantly prescient in his worry that assessment would play the role it now plays in education: largely punitive; largely superficial (choosing to measure what is easy to measure rather than what actually matters); largely in service of mimetic teaching. But, as a philosopher of education, I would have loved to see Jackson’s keen and critical intelligence think more about how assessment might foster transformative teaching. If Jackson could have found more ways to show how the transformative is held nascent within ostensibly mimetic teaching, then more could have been done to assert the transformative, but from inside of dominant conversations. This is the main goal of my paper. My aim is to suggest that we can come closer to the tradition of teaching Jackson hoped to discover in his essay through a rethinking of the possibilities of assessment, and—as a possible consequence of doing this—offer philosophers of education interesting opportunities to reengage with the broader educational community.¹²

Jackson’s Understanding of Assessment and Its Limitations

In “The Mimetic and the Transformative” assessment is often only addressed indirectly, but I see it looming in the background at many turns. Jackson criticizes the growing teacher accountability movement, criticizes the fact that we often only measure what can be easiest measured and so teach what can be most efficiently transmitted to students, and he relatedly worries a great deal about the “gradual emergence and the ultimate hegemony of a “scientific spirit” within the educational community.”¹³ To get a fuller picture of Jackson’s thinking on assessment, one needs to follow a footnote. The footnote comes at the end of this passage:

Those who look upon the growth of the mimetic tradition as an unadulterated good or close to that....view the decline of the transformative tradition with equal delight. They believe it rids the teaching profession of unnecessary sentimentality and mystifying talk about vague notions like character and virtue and at the same time removes yet another roadblock toward making the practice of teaching more objective and precise and its results more measurable.¹⁴

This is a key point. Jackson almost always links assessment to something like a positivist worldview and he also sees assessment as antithetical to an appreciative understanding of character and virtue in education. While there are some in education who may see talk of character as pointless and misleading and who do believe that the goal of assessment is to achieve the certainty of positivist objectivity, I don't think this is anything like the whole story. Someone committed to using assessment as a means to improving education¹⁵ is not necessarily committed to a belief that assessment is objective, and she is certainly not committed to a world where character and virtue are banished from schooling and education.¹⁶ Jackson's way of telling the story establishes a faulty dualism that only reinforces a mimetic/transformational divide. Here is where the footnote linked to the passage is important. Jackson references a published exchange with Robert Glaser¹⁷ and it is in this exchange where we most clearly see the limitations of Jackson's thinking on assessment and how it only serves to solidify the mimetic/transformational divide.

In "Private Lessons in Public Schools: Remarks on the Limits of Adaptive Instruction," Jackson both introduces the terms mimetic and transformational, and focuses on the role that assessment plays in privileging the mimetic at the expense of exploring and cultivating education's transformational possibilities. It is important to note the "adaptive" (or what is also referred to as "cybernetic") teaching is the most current iteration of the mimetic tradition. While adaptive should not be taken to encompass all instances of mimetic teaching, in many ways, adaptive education—facilitated by new technologies and new assessment technologies—is, to Jackson, mimetic education in its most seductive and pernicious form. Jackson has two key criticisms of how adaptive education makes assessment central to learning. First, Jackson is highly skeptical of adaptive models of teaching because adaptive instruction, given Jackson's understanding of it, is premised on a belief that education has to be broken down into manageable steps in order for learning to happen.¹⁸ Second, Jackson believes adaptive education, driven as it is by assessment, is necessarily mimetic because there are too many educational objectives and aspirations that simply cannot be assessed. According to Jackson, when we focus on assessment we are always—even if unintentionally—devaluing transformational goals and aspirations.

Here is how Jackson describes adaptive education: "Reduced to its simplest terms, [adaptive education] calls for comparing the student's performance with some standard of what is desired—evaluating the "match" between that performance and the educational environment, as Glaser puts it—and then deciding what to do on the basis of that comparison."¹⁹ Jackson uses the example of the relationship between a piano teacher and her pupil to stand as exemplary of

adaptive education. The piano teacher knows how the piece should be performed, and she judges the student's performance against that standard. If the student meets the standard, teacher and pupil can move forward. But, if the student falters, the teacher localizes errors and missteps, and adapts her instruction to make sure that the student overcomes those errors and so meets the standard. This will generally mean practicing a specified section of the piece in order to successfully perform the entire piece proficiently.

Jackson makes the piano teaching example analogous to adaptive instruction in general. Jackson writes:

the fundamental principles [of adaptive education] are:

- divide a complex learning task into its component parts,
- get the student to work on each part sequentially,
- monitor his performance, matching it against some standard of what is desired, and
- make such corrections as are necessary to bring the performance in line with the model (the latter set of actions being accomplished by a variety of means, sometimes involving the teacher and something not.)

The most rudimentary form of these adaptive principles I shall call "mimetic," meaning imitative. I do so because, when stripped of all their embellishments—as in the piano teaching example—their fundamental aim is to get the student to *reproduce* or *imitate* in his own actions or words a form of behavior that has already been settled upon.²⁰

As a description of adaptive instruction, this is relatively fair. A teacher who adapts her instruction has a clear instructional goal in mind—to follow Jackson's example, the student will play a piece of music proficiently—and then creates tasks and opportunities that allow the student to progress toward meeting this goal—the student begins with the opening, or with the easier parts of the piece, and then moves on to other parts of the piece or begins to work on the more difficult parts of the piece—and then the instructor assesses whether the student plays the piece well or needs to go back to one of the steps in order to play the piece well as measured against a clear standard of excellence. If the student is successful, she will reproduce or imitate what the teacher has in mind when she started her instruction.

I note that Jackson's description of adaptive instruction is only relatively fair because a teacher can adapt instruction without decomposing a goal into steps that must be worked on sequentially, and there are important educational goals that don't need to be mimetic (or imitative) in order for a teacher to adapt her instruction as a means to allowing students to meet these goals. For example, a teacher can set the (relatively underspecified) goal of helping students understand the importance of appreciating the pulls of patriotism (or regionalism, or sectarianism) in many national and international conflicts without having to clearly define what these terms mean or dividing how a student reaches this understanding

into precise steps. Developing an understanding of complex ideas and concepts doesn't necessarily come in steps; a single transformative moment or educational experience (facilitated by a teacher's understanding of her student based on her use of formal and informal assessments) can develop it. Assessment and adaptive instruction—in this type of example—looks less like the work of Jackson's piano teacher, or steps in a computer program (something Jackson often compares adaptive instruction to), and more like the work of an educator Jackson might describe as transformative.²¹ For example, as a teacher I might share the written personal testimony of a participant in a conflict, or a documentary that makes a conflict real for a student in ways that other means of instruction cannot, in order to help a student progress toward my instructional goal. I don't need to break the development of understanding into steps that every single student marches through. But, just because I do not break my instruction into steps, it doesn't mean that I—as a teacher—am not consistently assessing students and using the results of my assessment to adapt learning opportunities in ways that will allow each student to more successfully meet my goals. I have an end in mind—sophisticated understanding—and I use feedback and assessment to help students achieve that end in whatever manner works best for that particular student.²²

Not only does adaptive instruction not need to progress sequentially, its goals needn't be as limited (and limiting) as Jackson sees them. Jackson seems to believe that the only goals fit for adaptive instruction are mimetic ones. That is, the teacher needs to have a precise and uniform goal in mind for students in order to successfully adapt her instruction. A baseball player hitting a home run, a piano player playing a piece in conformity with expectations, a student successfully using algorithms to solve problems with a clear answer; these are the examples Jackson has in mind and these are the types of examples that circumscribe his understanding. He writes, "Instead of worrying about how teachers will know when their students have mastered this or that objective—an orientation that causes our thoughts to flow naturally in the direction of behaviorism and associated ideologies—we need ask whether there may not be some desirable outcomes of schooling that are not particularly well served by being translated into precise terms."²³ Behaviorism. According to Jackson, this is the mentality that a teacher is bound to when she sets a goal and uses assessment to empower students to reach it. While there may be some who see adaptive instruction this way, the characterization is—ultimately—misleading, or at least unhelpfully limited. And, I feel that Jackson's attempt to offer counterexamples does little to help his case. That is, Jackson argues that adaptive instruction ultimately fails because there are just too many educational goals that do not fit an adaptive paradigm. As I hope to show, this is not the case.

First, Jackson argues that there are many instructional moments when a teacher doesn't focus on student learning. He gives the example of lectures, and argues that the lecturer isn't primarily concerned "if the material is getting across." Jackson goes on to ask: "Shall we accuse him of being a poor teacher for his lack of interest in such matters?"²⁴ What follows is likely a contentious claim, but I am of the mind that a lecturer should not be characterized as a teacher unless she is concerned with whether or not her students learn what she intends to teach. That is,

if a teacher lectures a group of students, gives an assessment, and finds that very few students understood what she was lecturing on, then she needs to adapt her instruction so that students gain the intended understanding. While a lecture that inspires, or evokes, or entertains has all kinds of value, in order to qualify as instruction (and the lecturer a teacher) there needs to be a goal and the speaker must care if her audience realizes her goal. Jackson—I feel—anticipates this type of objection, and so makes his second point. Jackson argues that there are many cases of education we value where a teacher is “effecting in his students a change whose precise form cannot be determined in advance and whose “rightness” or “wrongness” cannot be judged even when the change is made manifest.”²⁵ I am not sure I can agree with this.

It is surely the case that many things we value in education do not have a precise form that can be determined in advance. When we ask a child to write a poem, or to use an equation to pose—and not solve simple—problems, or to offer interpretations of historical events, teachers cannot know with any type of certainty what the student will do, and teachers often do not have a precise vision in mind of what a “correct” performance will look like. But, this doesn’t mean that the “rightness” or “wrongness” of what is made manifest cannot be judged and—importantly—improved through the teacher’s use of assessment. Do we really believe that we cannot judge the quality of a student poem, or a student’s use of mathematics, or a student’s ability to offer a sophisticated interpretation of historical events? If we don’t, then why do we offer students grades on these types of things? Though it may be hard to offer the types of feedback that allow students who don’t initially perform well to perform better, I think it is unhelpful—and ultimately unprofessional practice as a teacher—to express or communicate to a student that no amount of feedback we give as a teacher will allow the student to meet the imprecise standard we are nonetheless grading her on. Teachers shouldn’t both pretend that their educational goals are ineffable while praising—through grades, feedback, recommendations, etc.—students who meet these goals and punishing students who do not. To put the point more positively, think about those teachers who facilitate opportunities for students to *see* success, either through rubrics or exemplars,²⁶ and who are able to give the types of feedback and create the type of learning environment where the balance between freedom and discipline lead to a high percentage of successful performances for a great diversity of learners. These teachers find ways to step students through a process that leads to success, even in acts that are impossible to specify what success precisely looks like in advance of the moment when the teacher begins facilitating student learning.

Even if these criticisms are compelling, it is important to consider the full weight of Jackson’s conclusion. He argues that if we make monitoring student progress toward a goal “central to what teaching is all about, [then] a would-be profession remains no more than a trade. More serious than that, if our notions of teaching should ever be confined to what has herein been described as mimetic principles, the ultimate loser will not be the teachers, but those taught.”²⁷ This is important. Should we conflate education with feedback and assessment? Even as we think about this question, I also can’t help but feel that Jackson’s picture of adaptive instruction is overly influenced by his making computer instruction adaptive

instruction's closest analog. That is, if we imagine teachers reading scripts that are meant to progress students sequentially toward a clearly defined goal, then teaching is not a profession, and students will likely suffer. And, given this vision of teaching and learning it seems like we might easily replace teachers with computers. But, as compelling as this line of thinking might be,²⁸ it is not a fair or accurate description of adaptive education. Adaptive teaching is about a teacher knowing student and subject well enough to create connections that allow the highest number of students to achieve ambitious learning goals.²⁹ More, I would argue that students suffer more in an un-adaptive environment and teaching remains de-professionalized when everyone involved in teaching isn't thinking enough about how we can use assessment to improve learning outcomes for every student. Though talk of learning outcomes and student improvement may appear overly mimetic, this needn't be the case.

Adaptive education is—when we can look at it through a lens not overly influenced by things like computing metaphors—what every student deserves, and it is philosophically defeasible. It is certainly not bound to the mimetic tradition, and it is not destined to be non-transformative. In his response to Jackson, Robert Glaser makes key points worth considering. First, Glaser writes, “Feedback of information is a primary mechanism of human growth, development and evolution. In fact, it is the non-cybernetic models of learning we have most to fear, because they are insensitive to making teaching adaptive to the style and intellect of students.”³⁰ I have to agree with Glaser. We have more to fear when teachers tout the ineffability of what they are teaching and do little to help a student progress toward that understanding. Importantly, this needn't look like a computer program adapting to student performance; leading the student along a sequence to a predetermined conclusion. It will often look—to take Jackson's exemplar of transformative teaching—Socratic in nature. Here I am thinking of a concerned teacher adapting his or her instruction to the needs of students in the pursuit of meaningful ends. Glaser notes, “models of excellence exist, but variations on it are counted as intellectual inventions and artistic improvisations that encourage the development of human intellectual endeavor, problem solving, and thinking. Certainly, mimetic principles are supplanted by exploratory ones in this conception.”³¹ To return to examples I offer above, we do know excellence in poetry, even though we don't have formulas for creating poems; we know what the creative utilization of math looks like, even though we can't directly transmit this knowledge (mimetically) to students; and, we know creative and insightful historical interpretation, even though no algorithms exist for its creation. But, we can help students develop this understanding, and can develop student understanding by offering exemplars and providing feedback as students work toward exemplary performance. As Glaser notes, there are “many situations [where] teachers do not have algorithms. But certainly, good teachers have heuristics.”³²

As I hope to have demonstrated, there is so much that Jackson gets right, but he does get adaptive education wrong. Though there are ways in which adaptive education can be formulaic and bound to mimetic principles, when we push at the meaning of adaptive education, it is clear that what might be described as mimetic is indeed transformative. These examples, I believe, help us overcome the

mimetic/transformational divide. When we set ambitious—even if hard to define—goals and use consistent informative feedback tied to those goals to assist students in the realization of these goals, the line between transformational and mimetic becomes blurred. This blurring is important because instead of judging—through grades and other means—students against a standard we do not teach but which is nonetheless controlling, we use assessment and feedback to empower students to make progress toward the standard. Every student deserves the opportunity to experience the transformational dimensions of learning; holding that there is really no way to teach toward the standards that we most value seems problematic at best. In the final section I expand this line of thought with reference to examples that demonstrate how assessment and adaptive education harbor transformational possibilities for teaching, teachers and learners.

*Assessment, Adaptive Instruction and Teaching Worthy of the Name*³³

One aspect of “The Mimetic and the Transformational” that I find particularly provocative and important is Jackson’s belief that students from current and historically underserved student populations receive overly mimetic (in the most pejorative sense of the word) forms of education.³⁴ It is important to be critical of this.³⁵ Terms like drill and control come to mind when we think about educating other people’s children. This way of putting the issue—I hope—calls to mind Lisa Delpit’s powerful thinking.³⁶ While Delpit is critical of mimetic education in its pejorative sense, she also reminds us that not making something explicit is a certain type of injustice. Here is where I think we can continue to push the mimetic/transformational divide by using the lens of assessment. Do things like rubrics and assignment guidelines level down learning,³⁷ or do they democratize and transform it? I think we might agree that drill and control can be extremely negative, but we have to wonder what happens when we leave unwritten—but ultimately controlling—cultural narratives and norms untaught and unacknowledged. When we don’t teach students these, not only do we not empower students, we leave that which is untaught in the dominant position. This is what I take to be one of Delpit’s most important points, and one that philosophers of education should think through. It is difficult to see how we can empower students to overcome controlling narratives and norms by leaving those norms and narratives untaught. Though we may disagree with the norms and narratives and though we know it is unjust that they are controlling in the ways that they are, they should not be ignored. It is difficult to overcome a problem we don’t acknowledge. Instead of holding to a belief that pretending or wishing that norms and narratives don’t exist is enough to make them go away, we need to address them squarely. Succeeding in an unjust society should be seen as the difficult thing that it is. If we do not live in acknowledgement of the dominant norms and narratives, success is difficult if not impossible; but, if we succeed in an unjust society, then we are comprised. We should not pretend that this is not the case. Instead of pretending, we need to make our norms and narratives explicit. This is a step toward transformation, even if the move can feel mimetic. Though the master’s tools may never dismantle the master’s house—to draw on the title of the masterful essay by

Audre Lorde—we need to know how the master’s world works in order to develop the tools necessary to dismantle it. We need to spell out the un-spelled out in order to empower students and engage in transformative critique. A type of teaching that can feel overly mimetic and non-transformative, when viewed through the lens of the work of someone like Lisa Delpit can seem quite different. One can help effect a transformation for students through teaching that may appear squarely within the mimetic tradition.

Moving from cultural critique to teacher education, Hugh Sockett—in his book *Knowledge and Virtue in Teaching and Learning: The Primacy of Dispositions*³⁸—shows that we can make goals and aims explicit, and use assessment to help future teachers reach those goals, in ways that are not pejoratively mimetic. Sockett does the difficult—but invaluable—work of making what philosophically informed teaching might look like more explicit to teachers and teacher educators by offering heuristics (rubrics, questions for pre-service teachers and teacher educators) that aim to facilitate growth toward meaningful—even if impossible to make algorithmic—goals. While it is important to criticize assessments pre-service teachers are subjected to—be it InTASC standards or EdTPA exams—and while it is important to recognize the political nature of these assessments, there is still conceptually work to be done. We can keep working on alternatives, while exploring whether or not the current standards are as pejoratively mimetic as they might initially appear. For example, InTASC standard nine is on ethical practice, and it is hard to see why more philosophers aren’t engaged with defining what ethical practice means and how we can help teach teachers—using exemplars and rubrics—to make their work more ethical.³⁹ I don’t think it is enough to wish that teachers were more moral in their practices, or to praise the moral when we see it; if we are engaged in the work of teacher education, we should empower teachers to realize the aims that we value through assessment and adaptive education. This is why I find Sockett’s work so valuable. It is one thing to be critical of exams, but it is far more valuable to do everything in our power to build a framework that allows the values that we find lacking in education to flourish. Teachers will always be assessed; instead of seeing assessment as a necessary evil, I believe we have an opportunity to see assessment as a transformative possibility. Developing a future teacher’s moral life in schools will most certainly not entail providing scripts, or offering algorithms, but reading foundational texts in education—something Jackson suggests in “Facing Our Ignorance”—is also (for many teachers) not enough either. Foundational texts and reflection are necessary, but they aren’t sufficient. Future teachers need to learn how to enact aims in practice,⁴⁰ and they need feedback that will allow them to more powerfully enact—and reflect on—their aims. Sockett does this well, but when it comes to aims and their enactment, more voices are needed. We know that aims can be contentious, and it is important for philosophers of education to try to spell out the aims they find most important for teachers to enact in the classroom. But, the work cannot stop there. Philosophers of education can also think through the types of assessment that might facilitate growth toward those aims. It is important to move beyond critique and to the development of a conversation on aims and how they are enacted. Again, this may feel like a mimetic project, but I think the way to large-scale transformations of

teaching and classroom life is making aims explicit and finding assessments that allow teachers to adapt their instruction to help students realize those aims.

One of the most promising recent developments along this front is Mary Kennedy's recent article: "Parsing Teaching."⁴¹ Kennedy makes the case that we can decompose teaching—a recent goal in teacher education literature⁴²—into component parts that can be reproduced in the classroom, but how we combine these parts, how we think about these parts coming together to form philosophically defensible, moral, teaching is something that is far more difficult to accomplish. As I read Kennedy's article, I can't help but think she is calling for something like what Jackson hoped to accomplish in "The Mimetic and the Transformative": a way of teaching where students learn the moves central to teaching (somewhat mimetically), while having the ability to rethink how these moves fit together and are reconstructed to serve new students, different contexts and evolving aims. Future teachers need to learn the moves—how to "enlist student participation," how to "contain behavior," and so on—but these moves cannot be applied mechanically and often come in conflict. As such, teachers also need to be taught—through observations and readings on exemplary performances by teachers, through facilitated reflection, etc.—what it would mean to enact a moral classroom in the light of all of the complexities of teaching. Philosophers of education can be valuable co-workers—with teacher educators and teachers—in projects like this.

Finally, I want to bring our attention to two approaches to teaching prominent in K-12 schools, and approaches that I teach my future teachers: differentiated instruction⁴³ and Understand by Design (UbD).⁴⁴ Both of these approaches to teaching put assessment first, both are adaptive forms of instructions, but both also put transformative teaching first. In fact, both approaches make the strong point that learning cannot happen most effectively for every student unless the teacher has a clear learning target and uses assessment to help each student reach that target. Differentiated instruction and UbD are premised on the belief that it is unfair to judge students against an ineffable standard, and a belief that ambitious goals can guide adaptive instruction. That is, we can create rubrics and provide instances of exemplary performance—excellence in poetry, excellence in interpretation, excellence in creativity in math and science—so as to help students toward what was hitherto taken to be near impossible to teach. More, making the ineffable explicit does not cheapen or lessen what is learned; it doesn't limit creativity: it empowers students. Adapting instruction doesn't mean taking steps to a predetermined end, but it does mean having ambitious goals in mind and knowing how to use assessment to help students reach these goals. As a philosopher of education, I find these approaches to teaching extremely effective and interesting, but—to my knowledge—there are not many philosophically informed discussions of these prominent approaches to teaching in the philosophy of education literature.⁴⁵ I think this is a shame, because a close look at differentiated instruction and UbD show how adaptive education—guided by assessment—can fit squarely within the transformative tradition of teaching. Teachers who practice differentiated instruction don't see teaching as leading students lockstep to a predetermined end; they use assessment to free students to realize an ambitious instructional goal through a variety of processes, through creating a variety of products and utilizing a

variety of content. Jackson engages closely with mimetic teaching brilliantly in *Life in Classrooms*, and I think it is important to engage with prominent practices like differentiation and UbD today to see if—even in our mimetic educational era—new forms of transformative teaching are occurring precisely through the use of assessment and adaptive instruction.

While Jackson was clearly skeptical of adaptive instruction and assessment, I think we need to rethink this skepticism and see the ways in which adaptive instruction and assessment can be transformative. It may be the case that making things explicit—having clear learning goals, discussing the norms that are controlling inside and outside the classroom—may have a leveling effect—limiting creativity and philosophical insight—but I think we need to test this hypothesis. I am of the mind that making things explicit through assessment targets will lead to transformative outcomes for many students who are currently underserved by current classroom practices.⁴⁶ Combining the skepticism of the Jackson who wrote “The Mimetic and the Transformative: Alternative Outlooks on Teaching” with the keen eye for classroom practices embodied by his *Life in Classrooms* will—I feel—help us see ways in which what we may take to be mimetic practices harbor the transformative, and—in doing this—lead to new futures for philosophers of education. In the end, I think this approach will allow us to be far more critical of pejoratively mimetic education, while allowing transformative education new possibilities. Adaptive education—guided by assessment—*can* lead to student growth and empowerment; it also offers philosophers of education opportunities to reengage with larger conversations in education. These conversations need the voice of philosophers of education. As a field, we need to think through how assessment and adaptive education—which are clearly going to remain central to classroom practice, and which have been demonstrated to be effective by educational researchers⁴⁷—can be transformative, and philosophers of education may be uniquely suited to doing the conceptual work of showing how a new tradition of teaching might emerge because of this.

Conclusions

Conceptual work alone will not—to be sure—lead to political changes that will upend our mimetic educational era. Nonetheless, without a vision, possibilities perish. Jackson knew, as we do now, that individual teachers are finding ways to combine what is good in the mimetic and transformative teaching traditions, but given the overall climate of teaching these individual voices are not enough to change conversations. Dewey laments this fact in *The Sources of a Science of Education*. He writes:

the successes of such individuals [exceptional teachers] tend to be born and to die with them: beneficial consequences extend to those pupils who have personal contact with such gifted teachers. No one can measure that waste and loss that have come from the fact that the contributions of such men and women in the past have been thus confined, and the only way by which we can prevent such waste in the future is by methods which enable us to make

an *analysis* of what the gifted teacher does intuitively, so that something accruing from his work can be communicated to others.⁴⁸

As I read this quote, I see Dewey calling for closer partnerships between philosophers of education, teacher educators and teachers. If our hope is to forge a new tradition of teaching where assessment and adaptive instruction are used to promote transformative ends, there is a lot to learn from teachers who are finding ways to enact transformative teaching in a mimetic era. Concept-building is important. Doris Santoro found a language—demoralization—that fits what teaching looks like in our era, and I think we might do something similar when it comes to the mimetic and the transformative. Assessment can be terribly mis-educative and constraining. The term “eduprenuerial” adaptive education⁴⁹ sounds nightmarish. But, this doesn’t mean that assessment and adaptive education cannot be transformative. In fact, and as I hope to have shown above, the transformative is given new possibilities because of assessment and adaptive education. What is needed is a new language of teaching that moves beyond the mimetic and the transformative, and to a language that does justice to all of those individual teachers doing good work with assessment and adaptive instruction, and all of those individual philosophers of education conceptualizing futures for education, and all of those parents, citizens and students who can feel and see the potential in our educational present that lies dormant. Individuals are not enough; what is needed is work on a vision beyond the mimetic and transformative that will usher in an era where assessment and adaptive instruction are used to promote the potential of each learner. Again, politics are important, and our current era is pejoratively mimetic. But, this shouldn’t keep us bound in and to a dualism; we need to see assessment and adaptive instruction for what they can be: freeing, educative; fostering spaces for teaching worthy of the name.

Notes

¹ In his *The Practice of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986). I find it important to note that I started this paper before I learned about Jackson’s death. While there is something of a critical tone to some of this essay, in the end, I would like to think that Jackson would be happy to see someone working to overcome the dualism he wanted to dismantle. I just hope this essay does his thought justice. And, I think Jackson’s work—and his overall philosophical style—deserves far more attention than it currently is receiving. I hope this essay revives some interest in his corpus.

² It is hard to understate the importance of this paper or Jackson’s work in general. A quick Google search shows that this paper is on a number of syllabi and has been cited over 550 times; a rarity for papers in philosophy of education.

³ For a Dewey-inspired discussion of this relationship, see David Hawkins, *The Informed Vision* (New York: Algora, 2002).

⁴ For an excellent description of just how prescient Jackson was, see: Doris A. Santoro, "Good Teaching in Difficult Times: Demoralization in the Pursuit of Good Work," *American Journal of Education* 118, no. 1 (2001).

⁵ Doris A. Santoro (with Lisa Morehouse), "Teaching's Conscientious Objectors: Principled Leavers of High-Poverty Schools," *Teachers College Record* 113, no. 12 (2011).

⁶ As one of our best readers of Dewey, I can see Jackson wanting to accomplish for these traditions of teaching what Dewey does in *Experience and Education* when discussing the "old" and "new" forms of education; working beyond these dualisms, Dewey wants to discover what education worthy of the name might look like.

⁷ Philip W. Jackson, "Facing Our Ignorance," *Teachers College Record* 88, no. 3 (1987).

⁸ For some representative examples, see: Megan Laverty, "Conceiving Education: The Creative Task Before Us," *Theory and Research in Education* 12, no. 1 (2014); Rene Arcilla, "Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?" *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002); Stanton Wortham, "What Does Philosophy Have to Offer Education and Who Should be Offering It?" *Educational Theory* 61, no. 6 (2011); Gary Fenstermacher, "Should Philosophers and Educators be Speaking to Each Other?" *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002).

⁹ From his essay "Self-Reliance."

¹⁰ Many scholars make this point, for one of the most popular, see: Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error* (New York: Vintage, 2014).

¹¹ Part of me feels that Jackson's early work as an educational psychologist may have overly influenced his vision when it comes to assessment. As he so clearly describes in the updated preface to *Life in Classroom*, so much of educational assessment was paper and pencil tests that often concealed more than they revealed about classrooms, students, teaching and learning. Philip W. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990). I would be fascinated—and I make this point in the conclusion—to see what Jackson would think of things like portfolio assessments and other forms of—what Lorna Earl calls—assessments for/as learning (see: Lorna Earl, *Assessment as Learning: Using Classroom Assessment to Maximize Student Learning* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2003).

¹² Before turning to my argument, it is important to stress that my paper is an appreciative reading of Jackson. I love how Jackson describes his work on Dewey as "appreciative exegesis." I can only hope I offer something of the same here; see: Philip Jackson, "John Dewey's 1906 Definition of Art," *Teachers College Record* 104, no. 2 (2002).

¹³ Jackson, "Mimetic," 132.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁵ Jackson is skeptical that teaching can be improved (see "Facing Our Ignorance" for a clear example of this).

¹⁶ This is especially true in Hugh Sockett's work, which I discuss below.

¹⁷ Like Jackson, Glaser was President of AERA. It is fascinating, from the perspective of where the field of philosophy of education is now, that not only would a philosopher of education serve as President of AERA, but that scholars outside of

philosophy of education—prominent people like Glaser—would be willing to take philosophy of education seriously enough to have a published exchange with a philosopher of education. I wonder how we can get back to this place. I think Jackson’s style, and his willingness to engage so directly with everyday classroom practices, might be one step toward this goal.

¹⁸ It is important to note that my criticism of Jackson’s approach to adaptive instruction could be seen as ahistorical. While adaptive instruction has changed much since Jackson wrote about it, I think the fact remains that Jackson was averse to spelling out instructional goals in the ways I advocate for as the essay continues.

¹⁹ Philip W. Jackson, “Private Lessons in Public Schools: Remarks on the Limits of Adaptive Instruction,” in *Adapting Instruction to Individual Differences*, eds. Margaret C. Wang and Herbert J. Walberg (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan, 1985), 70.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

²¹ For excellent discussions of using assessment in transformative ways, see Grant Wiggins, *Educative Assessment: Designing Assessments to Inform and Improve Student Performance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); Carol Ann Tomlinson and Tonya R. Moon, *Assessment and Student Success in a Differentiated Classroom* (Alexandria, VA: ACSD, 2013); Earl, *Assessment As Learning*.

²² This is a key tenant of differentiated instruction, as I will discuss below. Each student must meet the same ambitious standard, but they get their in different ways. Thinking that each student can march sequentially in the same way to the same goal is pedagogically foolish, given what we know about learner differences.

²³ Jackson, “Private Lessons,” 76.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁶ For an excellent and detailed discussion, see: Grant Wiggins, *Educative Assessment* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1998).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁸ There are some technologists who may believe that this might be the future of education. But, this does not take away from the fact that the concept of adaptive education is not fully circumscribed by this limited vision.

²⁹ For an excellent discussion of ambitious instruction, see: Mark Windschitl, Jessica Thompson and Melissa Braaten, “Ambitious Pedagogy by Novice Teachers,” *Teachers College Record* 113, no. 7 (2011).

³⁰ Robert Glaser, “Cognition and Adaptive Education,” in *Adapting Instruction to Individual Differences*, eds. Margaret C. Wang and Herbert J. Walberg (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan, 1985), 87.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

³² *Ibid.*, 89.

³³ This is meant to echo Dewey’s position in *Experience and Education*. It is not old versus new, or transformative versus mimetic that is important: it is about finding ways toward the better.

³⁴ Although Jackson’s work isn’t generally considered to be concerned with issues related to socio-economic status, he is explicit at the end of “Mimetic and Transformative” (see pp. 142-143) that students are differentially exposed to the

mimetic and transformative traditions based on their placements in and by society. More affluent students experience transformative teaching, other students are subjected to mimetic teaching.

³⁵ The popular work of Jonathan Kozol makes this point in a compelling way. For an extremely compelling scholarly look at the issue, see the work of John Rury.

³⁶ Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York, New Press, 2006).

³⁷ Here I am thinking of the work of Kierkegaard, especially in his *The Present Age*.

³⁸ Hugh Sockett, *Knowledge and Virtue in Teaching and Learning: The Primacy of Dispositions* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

³⁹ Or, if we object to the language of ethical and prefer moral, why not engage with this type of discussion? The point of raising this type of question is to show that questions like this are important, not only at the level of published critique but at the level of developing teaching practices.

⁴⁰ For an excellent discussion of why enactment is so important, see Mary M. Kennedy, "The Role of Preservice Teacher Education," in *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Teaching and Policy* (eds. Linda Darling-Hammond and Gary Sykes (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

⁴¹ *Journal of Teacher Education* 67, no. 1 (2016).

⁴² For a good overview, see Deborah Ball and Francesca Forzani, "Building a Common Core for Learning to Teach, and Connecting Professional Learning to Practice," *American Educator* 35, no. 2 (2011).

⁴³ For a good introduction, see Carol Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms* [2nd edition] (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2001).

⁴⁴ Again, for an introduction, see Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* [2nd edition] (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2005).

⁴⁵ It has been very helpfully pointed out to me that the field of disabilities studies has some interesting philosophically informed literature on adaptive instruction.

⁴⁶ I make this point above with reference to Delpit and dominant cultural discourses, but UbD and differentiation also demonstrate how making learning targets more explicit serve students who have difficulty "intuiting" what the teacher is grading and judging them on.

⁴⁷ For two prominent examples, see John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown and Rodney R. Cocking (eds.), *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School* (expanded edition) (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000) and James W. Pellegrino, Naomi Chudowsky and Robert Glaser (eds.), *Knowing What Students Know: The Science and Design of Educational Assessment* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ John Dewey, *The Sources of a Science of Education*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works: 1925–1953*, Volume 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydson (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 4-5.

⁴⁹ The field of educational innovation is only growing by the day, and the promise of individualized adaptive education seems to be the holy grail of investors ready to cash in on the work of teaching. For two recent news articles see:

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/13/reaching-math-students-one->

by-one/?_r=0 and <http://www.npr.org/2015/05/07/404859293/altschool-promises-to-reimagine-education-for-the-2030s>