

Why do we teach?

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Abstract

The ubiquity of teaching in human societies presents a significant puzzle, particularly considering that much of modern education involves abstract concepts which do not directly enhance survival. This article reviews two main perspectives on the origins of teaching: teaching as a cognitive adaptation for transmitting complex knowledge, and teaching as a cultural product of modern societies. The evidence indicates that teaching is present in all societies, suggesting it may be an evolutionary adaptation. However, skills, including complex ones, can be acquired through other forms of social learning such as imitation. This article proposes a third perspective: teaching as a by-product of our proclivity to cooperate. By examining ethnographic studies, psychology experiments, and surveys on teachers' motivations, this article argues that teaching requires traits like mind-reading, communication, and altruism, which are foundational for cooperation. Teaching reflects our social nature, and is not just a mechanism for knowledge transmission. This reframing has important implications for educational theory and practice, particularly in how we conceptualize the aims of schooling, design curricula, and balance the goals of autonomy, citizenship, and labour market preparation.

Keywords: teaching evolution, social learning, cognitive adaptation, cooperation and altruism, hunter-gatherer societies

Introduction

The widespread presence of teaching across human societies presents a compelling puzzle. The reasons behind the ubiquity of teaching are contested due to disagreements over its definition, as well as the interpretation of empirical evidence of its incidence across cultures (Csibra and Gergely 2011; Strauss and Ziv 2012; Lancy 2016; Fray and Gore 2018; Lew-Levy et al. 2020). While teaching is widespread, much of what modern educational institutions impart involves abstract concepts, which do not directly enhance survival and thus cannot be explained as an adaptive behaviour rooted in biological selection. Learning such abstract theories necessitates teaching,

Received: 24 December 2024. Revised: 22 December 2025. Accepted: 2 March 2026

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even though historical survival did not depend on knowing them. The prevalence and perceived significance of teaching suggest biological foundations and universality. However, educational institutions are modern creations, absent from small-scale cultures like hunter–gatherer societies.

This enigma has sparked debate between two main perspectives. One posits teaching as a cognitive adaptation primarily for transmitting complex knowledge (Caro and Hauser 1992; Kruger and Tomasello 1996; Ziv and Frye 2004; Hoppitt et al. 2008; Strauss et al. 2014). This perspective argues that teaching transmits information and procedures more effectively than unassisted, first-hand learning (Premack and Premack 1996). Teaching is seen as a high-fidelity but costly mode of knowledge transmission specifically suited for complex information.

In contrast, the other, cultural perspective views teaching as a recent invention of modern, affluent Western societies, with limited presence in hunter–gatherer societies, and an arguable necessity for learning essential skills (Rogoff 2003, 2011; Lancy and Grove 2010; Lancy 2010a,b). Except for a few outliers (Misawa 2014; Frølund 2016; Boulter 2017), both philosophers and education scholars fundamentally view education as a socio-cultural process, yet they disagree on its purpose: some view it mainly as knowledge transmission, while others emphasize nurturing individual autonomy; some focus on equipping students for work and citizenship, whereas others prioritize their personal growth and transformation; and some consider its role to be preserving existing class structures, while others believe it should foster social change (Boulter 2017). Boulter argues that adopting a biological viewpoint enables us to move beyond this dichotomy by offering a coherent perspective on the significance of education and curriculum which does not involve political commitments. This article aligns with Boulter’s project in that it seeks to offer a more integrative perspective on the evolutionary, biological, and societal significance of teaching. Specifically, it applies the comparative method from biology—examining traits and behaviours across different societies and species—in order to assess two dominant perspectives: teaching as a cultural product, and teaching as cognitive adaptation. Combining insights from multiple disciplines, it will review evidence from surveys on teachers, anthropological and ethnographic studies on teaching in horticultural and hunter–gatherer societies, and psychology experiments, bringing this to bear on these two main perspectives, and revealing that both have their shortcomings. The evidence shows that all societies, including hunter–gatherer societies, use teaching, which would suggest that teaching is a cognitive adaptation (for reviews, see Kruger and Tomasello 1996 and Garfield et al. 2016). However, there is no direct relationship between the complexity of the knowledge learnt and the type of learning. Teaching occurs across different areas of knowledge and is not exclusive to complex domains, with other types of social learning such as imitation and observation regularly used for learning complex skills (Hewlett and Roulette 2016; Lew-Levy et al. 2017). Finally, the article will argue that a third perspective, hardly acknowledged, should be considered: teaching is a by-product of adaptations in other domains, and particularly of our proclivity to cooperate and be social. The evolutionary perspective advanced in this article offers important insights into the nature of teaching, and has significant implications for educational practice.

Teaching as a cultural product

While philosophers and education researchers generally regard education as a cultural product, anthropologists studying small-scale societies are divided between those who see education as culturally constructed, and those who understand it as an adaptive trait. Some cultural anthropologists argue that teaching is a feature of modern industrial societies and that in small-scale societies it has a marginal role (Rogoff 2003, 2011; Lancy and Grove 2010; Lancy 2010a,b) or is even an ‘unnecessary interference’ (Lancy 2010a: 82). Following Kline (2015), this definition of teaching can be characterized as culture based. Compared to modern industrial societies where learning occurs in formal settings, in small-scale cultures, learning occurs mostly informally by observing and imitating others with little role for the ‘student-centred, developmentally appropriate instruction by dedicated adults’ (Lancy 2010a: 97) typical of Western schools (Rogoff 2003, 2011). According to the cultural anthropology approach, children are self-starters and learn mostly through

independent exploration or observation without the authoritarian intervention of adults. Learning is thought to be a social process that proceeds from the ground up rather than the other way around; and learners take advantage of the social environment to replicate the observed behaviours practised by more expert members of their community (Bloch et al. 2001; Lancy 2016).

The analysis of teaching typical of this approach emphasizes the conscious top-down transmission of knowledge as the criteria to distinguish teaching from mere behaviour that facilitates learning in others. For teaching to occur, Lancy (2016) argues that the behaviour that facilitates learning in others must be intended to teach and not to serve some other purpose(s); that this behaviour is ubiquitous among humans and essential to their survival; and that teaching is unlikely to take place when the knowledge or skill can be acquired more easily, as teaching is generally costly to the teacher (Lancy 2016). As a corollary, 'teaching' should exclude cases of knowledge acquisition where learning occurs as a secondary effect of an activity which would have taken place in any case and is not facilitated in any way by the adult's behaviour. Those cases can be called assisted learning. Examples of situations where learning occurs socially but not through teaching include children observing an adult crafting an object, with the adult being aware of the learning possibilities that the experience might provide; or, parents providing their child with a toy tool kit, with the primary purpose of keeping the child entertained. In both cases, learning is a secondary effect of another activity and there is no conscious transmission of knowledge, yet novices acquire knowledge through interacting with adults. Using this approach, Lancy, in his review of 1,500 published and unpublished reports, concludes that children learn complex skills without Western-based approaches to education, and that teaching is rare in hunter-gatherer and small-scale societies (Lancy 2014).

The above approach to defining teaching has the advantage of using specific criteria; yet its core theoretical premises are questionable. First, the criterion that teaching must impart essential survival skills to be considered evolutionarily significant is problematic because not all evolutionarily significant behaviours are adaptive (West-Eberhard 2003; Laland et al. 2008). While evolutionarily significant abilities are universal among individuals of a species, many traits are both universal and evolutionarily significant without being adaptive. Instead, they may be linked to other adaptive behaviours. If evidence suggests that essential skills are not primarily transmitted through teaching, this does not imply that teaching lacks evolutionary significance. Teaching may be universally present, not as an adaptive trait, but as a by-product of another trait. For instance, language is a universal trait with various functions, some of which are not directly adaptive. Its primary function is as an instrument of thought, yet it is universally used for speech and communication, which are secondary functions of thought and language (Berwick and Chomsky 2016).

Second, the proposed distinction between evolutionarily significant abilities and cultural ones is dubious. The former, such as hunting, would be naturally developed by interacting with the natural environment, while the latter, such as mathematics, are learnt in the top-down process typical of formal education because children lack the natural ability to acquire them on their own (Geary 2007; Lancy 2016). Contrary to this view, recent research shows that the very type of ability cited as an example of a cultural ability—arithmetic—is innate. Children as young as five months demonstrate the ability to count and make decisions that involve counting (Wynn et al. 2002). In general, any ability, including those which are not adaptive such as higher-order mathematical knowledge, builds on an adaptive, evolutionarily significant ability, which limits and scopes the higher-order ability (Butterworth 2010; Dehaene 2011).

The insistence on adaptivity as a criterion for the evolutionary significance of teaching is unconvincing; and it accounts also for the empirical conclusion regarding the rarity of teaching in pre-industrial societies. According to this approach, survival and evolutionarily significant skills are not transmitted through teaching, which implies that teaching is marginal and rare in pre-industrial societies. Indeed, not all social-cultural anthropologists agree with the conclusion that teaching is a modern invention. Using the definitions of teaching from cognitive psychology discussed below, Kruger and Tomasello (1996) and Garfield et al. (2016) find multiple examples of teaching in their cross-cultural surveys of learning in humans.

In addition to conceptual issues, the scan observational methods used by anthropologists, despite providing a rich account of learning, do not systematically observe and classify children's activities, such that they often miss subtle and brief teaching events. The next section discusses examples of studies that use systematic observation to capture teaching episodes.

The emphasis on independent exploration and observation, free from authoritarian adult intervention, resonates with critical theories of education that view schools primarily as instruments for maintaining the current structure of power relations. From this perspective, education systems function as mechanisms for selecting and reproducing traits that align with the demands of hierarchical, often authoritarian workplaces: authority resides with the teacher, compliance is expected from students, and behavioural regulation is enforced through rule-based reward and punishment systems (Bernstein 1971; Bowles and Gintis 1976). This structure prioritizes obedience and rule following, often at the expense of creativity and independent thinking. Traits such as obedience, perseverance, an internal locus of control, and disciplined self-consciousness are not only cultivated within schools, but also closely correspond to those rewarded in the labour market.

This alignment between the hierarchical structure in schools and labour relations within the workplace—articulated by the 'correspondence principle' (Bowles and Gintis 1976)—highlights a tension between competing educational philosophies. Progressive approaches advocate for schooling that nurtures independent thinking, creativity, and exploration, whereas more conservative views emphasize the role of education in inculcating social norms and preparing youth for economic productivity. In the discussion section, I argue that while the critique of authoritarian pedagogy is important, it is incomplete. I will then introduce a revised version of the correspondence principle that addresses these limitations.

Teaching as a cognitive adaptation

Teaching, when viewed as a cognitive adaptation, contrasts sharply with the culture-based definition of teaching, which often limits it to the formal, school-based education characteristic of Western societies. Functionalist and mentalistic approaches, however, align with the cognitive adaptation hypothesis as outlined by Kline (2015). The functionalist approach explores teaching across species, identifying it in situations where a more knowledgeable individual alters their behaviour to guide learners through progressively challenging levels of competence, addressing the learners' evolving needs. This process often incurs a cost to the teacher, who does not derive immediate benefits from the act of teaching (Caro and Hauser 1992; Hoppitt et al. 2008). On the other hand, the mentalistic approach shifts the focus from observable behaviours to the mental processes involved in teaching, defining it as a deliberate effort to facilitate knowledge acquisition in a less knowledgeable individual (Kruger and Tomasello 1996; Ziv and Frye 2004; Strauss et al. 2014). Teaching, in this view, is an intentional activity aimed at increasing another individual's knowledge, relying on the theory of mind—the ability of both teacher and learner to understand the intentions of others.

Previously, I introduced cultural anthropology's critique of the cognitive adaptation hypothesis, which argues that teaching is rare in small-scale societies and therefore unlikely to be an adaptive behaviour. This conclusion partly stems from the application of a Western definition of teaching, and partly from the use of data collection methods based on ethnographic observation, self-reports, and interviews. The brevity of many teaching episodes and the issues associated with self-reporting suggest that such studies may have underreported teaching occurrences. A more effective approach would be to systematically record children's behaviour and interactions over extended periods. Indeed, few studies have systematically analysed teaching in small-scale hunter-gatherer societies (Maynard 2002; Kline et al. 2013; Hewlett and Roulette 2016; Boyette and Hewlett 2017; Lew-Levy et al. 2020).

These studies employ a functionalist definition of teaching, demonstrating that it is consistently utilized in hunter-gatherer cultures. For instance, Hewlett and Roulette (2016) videotaped twelve- to fourteen-month-old Aka children during their daily interactions, finding that teaching was frequent, taking various forms such as natural pedagogy, demonstration, task assignment, providing

learning opportunities, and feedback provision. They observed approximately ten teaching events per hour, typically brief, often lasting only a few seconds. These teaching instances were used to convey both social norms and survival skills, such as digging for roots, cutting food, building houses, or climbing trees. Interestingly, they found that the Aka community, which values autonomy and minimally intervenes in children's learning, displayed a relatively high frequency of teaching events during infancy. Teachers' intimate knowledge of learners likely accounts for the brevity of these teaching episodes.

Further research by [Lew-Levy et al. \(2020\)](#) observed thirty-five Hadza children and thirty-eight BaYaka children for two two-hour time blocks over a single day, using a thirty-second observe/thirty-second record procedure. Their findings revealed that 14 per cent of Hadza children's time and 11 per cent of BaYaka children's time was devoted to teaching or being taught subsistence skills, with child-to-child teaching occurring more frequently than adult-child teaching. [Boyette and Hewlett \(2017\)](#) studied children aged seven to twelve from eight Aka communities and three Ngandu neighbourhoods, observing them across three two-hour periods over three days. They found that teaching occurred at least once during the observation period for the majority of children, although it was less frequent compared to observational learning. These children received and provided teaching, often from parents and other adults.

[Garfield et al. \(2016\)](#) conducted a systematic review using the electronic Human Relations Area Files (eHRAF) database, analysing social learning in twenty-three hunter-gatherer cultures worldwide. Employing a behaviour-based definition of teaching, they found that teaching was the most commonly described method of transmission in ethnographic texts, followed by observation and imitation. This review challenges the notion that teaching is a cultural product of Western societies and rarely occurs in hunter-gatherer societies, a conclusion drawn by [Lancy \(2014\)](#).

Examining non-industrial societies more broadly, [Kruger and Tomasello \(1996\)](#) conducted a systematic analysis of teaching across different cultures, including hunter-gatherer societies. Using a definition of teaching based on intentions and mind-reading, they concluded that all cultures have some form of teaching. The evidence presented above suggests that teaching exists across various cultures, including hunter-gatherer ones, supporting the hypothesis that teaching is an inherent part of human nature and, therefore, evolutionarily significant. This leads us to further explore the role of teaching in the evolution of adaptive capacities.

The hypothesis that teaching is a cognitively adaptive ability presupposes that certain skills, essential for survival and reproduction, are best acquired through teaching. Since teaching requires more investment than other forms of learning, it is expected to be employed primarily in relation to skills that are difficult to acquire by other means, and not for those that can be learnt more easily through methods such as observation. However, research shows that teaching is not limited to transmitting complex skills and knowledge, as the hypothesis would suggest, but also includes basic skills that could be easily learnt through observation. Conversely, complex skills are often acquired through non-teaching-based learning methods ([Hewlett and Roulette 2016](#); [Lew-Levy et al. 2017](#)). The lack of a clear relationship between the complexity of skills and teaching as the primary mode of transmission indicates that learning across different domains occurs through various means, without a consistent correlation between the type of learning and the complexity of the skills learnt.

According to the cognitive adaptation approach, learners are expected to be selective when choosing a teacher, opting to acquire knowledge from the most competent individual and using cues of success as a proxy for teaching quality. However, research on hunter-gatherer societies shows that key competencies, such as hunting skills, are transmitted without the selection of teachers based on such cues. Adolescents often nominate any accessible adult as a teacher, regardless of success indicators, age, or body mass, learning within a broad and open network of adult teachers ([Lew-Levy et al. 2021](#)).

Another implication of teaching as a cognitively adaptive behaviour is that it should predominantly occur between biologically related individuals, since it is a costly and selfless activity in which the teacher facilitates learning without immediate direct benefits ([Caro and Hauser 1992](#)). Studies on hunter-gatherer societies reveal that while young individuals learn subsistence skills mainly

from their mothers and biologically related adults, they also acquire specialized hunting skills and social norms from both related and unrelated community members.

A central tenet of the hypothesis that teaching is a cognitive adaptation is the idea that humans have a natural ability to teach, which manifests from an early age (Strauss et al. 2002, 2014; Strauss 2005, 2013; Strauss and Ziv 2012). Despite its complexity, teaching is learnt reflexively without instruction, thus suggesting that teaching is a natural ability (Strauss 2005). Children, who are not taught how to teach, are able to teach how to play games and perform tasks such as dancing and building constructions with blocks (Ziv and Frye 2004). Children tend to teach when they recognize a knowledge gap in the recipient (Maynard 2002; Ziv and Frye 2004; Ziv et al. 2008; Strauss and Ziv 2012). Children as young as age three teach effortlessly and spontaneously using demonstrations. Five-year-old children accompany demonstrations with explanations, feedback behaviours, and errors diagnosis (Strauss, Ziv, and Stein 2002). Teaching occurs effortlessly and without teachers being aware of the cognitive principles underlying their approaches and techniques. Teachers can explain the reasoning underlying what they did when teaching—for example, breaking up complex material into simpler components to help pupils to learn (Strauss and Shilony 1994; Steiner 2002)—however, they cannot clearly explain the cognitive principles underlying the complexity reduction.

This view suggests that small children possess a theory of mind—a prerequisite for teaching—which enables them to infer others' beliefs and intentions, compare them to their own knowledge, and draw conclusions about the validity of those beliefs (Brothers 1990; Adolphs 2003). This ability is crucial for social interactions and develops early in life (Behne et al. 2005; Kovács et al. 2010). Its impairment is associated with conditions such as autism (Frith 1994) and schizophrenia (Brüne 2005). Autism, for instance, illustrates the severe impact of lacking a theory of mind, with devastating consequences for socialization, communication, and imagination (Baron-Cohen 1999).

By nine months, children can infer others' intentions and predict their actions based on goals (Behne et al. 2005). By age one, they refine their mind-reading capabilities (Rochat, Striano and Morgan 2004; Schoeppner, Sodian and Pauen 2006; Liszkowski et al. 2008), and by age four, they develop a full theory of mind (Wellman, Cross, and Watson 2001; Flavell 2004). Evidence of theory of mind development comes from various sources, often assessed through 'false belief task' experiments. In these experiments, children are shown scenarios where another person—say, John—places an object in a cupboard and leaves the scene. In John's absence, the object is moved to a different location, such as a basket. Children who have not yet developed a theory of mind typically predict that John will search for the object in the basket, failing to recognize that John cannot know its new location. In contrast, children with a developed theory of mind correctly infer John's false belief and predict that he will search in the cupboard. Liszkowski et al. (2008) conducted an experiment with twelve-month-old preverbal children, where the experimenter accidentally knocks an object off a table in one situation, pretends to look for it, and asks the infant where it is. In another situation, the experimenter knows the object's location but still asks the infant where it is. In the first scenario, infants point to the object's location; in the second, few infants point to its location, demonstrating that infants use a theory of mind to recognize when there is a knowledge gap between themselves and the experimenter.

Paleo-archaeological records of activities that require a theory of mind date back to 30,000–40,000 years ago: around that time, there are the first representations of impossible entities—the half-man, half-lion ivory statuette from Hohlenstein-Stadel, southern Germany, and the painting of the half-man, half-reindeer, from Trois-Frères, Ariège, in France (Baron-Cohen 1999). These are fictitious representations of entities that exist only in imagination and pretence; hence, they could not be created without a theory of mind. From this period, evidence from burial rituals shows that humans adorned dead individuals with jewellery. For example, in Sungir, Russia, around 30,000 years ago a sixty-year-old man was buried with two younger individuals, and all three were decorated with thousands of ivory beads, necklaces, and bracelets. This evidence suggests that the decorator cared about how others perceived the dead persons and wanted an

audience to think the persons were beautiful and of high status. All this evidence suggests from at least 30- to 40,000 years ago, our ancestors had a theory of mind (Baron-Cohen 1999).

Contrary to the theory that teaching is a natural ability, the natural pedagogy theory argues that teaching does not require a theory of mind. Teachers use naturally ostensive communication, such as raising eyebrows, talking in ‘motherese’, eye contact, directing speech to the infant, and calling the infant by its name, which learners have a predisposition to detect (Csibra and Gergely 2009). Natural pedagogy transmits naïve learners relevant knowledge more efficiently in opaque contexts thanks to demonstration by adults accompanied by ostensive signals. Natural pedagogy is independent from and evolved before mind-reading and language capacities when tools started being used by early hominids more than 2 million years ago. Tools had multiple and complex uses which are cognitively opaque and made learning from imitation difficult. Natural pedagogy theory argues that this difficulty in learning may have led to the unique human teaching system that allows for the transmission of opaque and complex knowledge.

Natural pedagogy’s claim that teaching occurs through ostensive signals provided by a more experienced demonstrator is not supported by empirical research. In contexts with opaque or conflicting information, children choose the type of information to acquire based on evidence and the prestige of the teacher, not just their intentions and signals, suggesting that young learners are selective in choosing what to learn and from whom, contrary to what we might expect based on natural pedagogy (Harris and Corriveau 2011; Sobel and Kushnir 2013; Heyes 2016).

Moreover, learning complex knowledge including the use of complex tools does not require teaching and ostensive signals. Learning through ostensive signals is an important natural ability, but it is just one of the many components of teaching and learning (Kline 2015). At the same time, ostensive signals have a generic function as signals of trustworthiness, which individuals use to decide who to associate with for a variety of experiences including learning, safety, and political alliances. In the next section, I discuss the idea that the ability to use ostensive signals and to teach in general is a consequence of an adaptation developed for functioning as a social agent.

Social scientists and philosophers have traditionally viewed the distinctive nature of education as a socially constructed phenomenon, often resisting the notion that it might also be an evolved, adaptive behaviour. Because formal education is unique to humans, it is frequently taken as evidence of *Homo sapiens*’ capacity to transcend biological determinism through cultural innovation. Boulter (2017), however, offers a compelling philosophical argument that education may be both uniquely human and biologically adaptive. He suggests that evolution has endowed our species with the capacity to acquire culturally mediated knowledge and skills necessary for securing resources, whereas most other animals rely predominantly on innate behaviours for survival.

This article builds on and extends Boulter’s thesis by advancing a biologically grounded view of education. It begins by recognizing two key points. First, not all higher-order cognitive abilities in humans are necessarily adaptive. Second, while the propensity to teach may be a stable feature of our species, it may not have evolved specifically for the purpose of transmitting knowledge. Teaching could instead be a by-product of other pro-social or cooperative traits.

The abrupt emergence of abstract, creative, and symbolic thought starting around 300,000 years ago further challenges adaptationist accounts. The lag between the appearance of new cognitive capacities in early *Homo* species and their eventual technological or cultural applications suggests that not all innovations were shaped directly by natural selection (Pääbo 2014). Evolutionary change in the genus *Homo* often follows a pattern of long periods of stasis followed by sudden leaps. For instance, the development of hand axes occurred well after the emergence of *Homo ergaster*, indicating that novel traits can arise before their eventual function is realized (Pääbo 2014).

Finally, although humans are prolific social learners, teaching is only one of several modes of cultural transmission. Its function may not be reducible to knowledge transfer alone. Once we acknowledge that not all biological traits are adaptations selected for their most common use, we can explore alternative hypotheses about the nature of teaching—beyond both the cultural constructivist and the transmission-based views. These possibilities will be examined in the following section.

(Vygotsky 1978). This suggests that teaching is grounded in trust, responsiveness, and shared intentionality.

The timing of the development of the theory of mind, language, and cooperative attitudes offers a crucial insight into the nature of the abilities that make teaching possible. The sudden emergence of complex tools and symbolic creations coinciding with the appearance of *Homo sapiens* suggests that language, abstract, and creative thinking including mind-reading emerged at once and rapidly around 300,000 years ago (Berwick and Chomsky 2016; Wrangham 2019). On the other hand, our cooperative attitudes emerged earlier, and evolved throughout a longer period. Language and thinking emerged in a brief period and therefore were not subject to selection (Berwick and Chomsky 2016), while our cooperative attitudes evolved through selection and independently from our ability to think and to use language, although the ability to communicate, once emerged, facilitated the expression of intentions, thus accelerating the evolution of cooperation. The best explanation of the evolution of our cooperative tendencies is that they are a by-product of the self-domestication that humans undertook (Wrangham 2019). Domestication in other animals occurs through the human-led selection of the paedomorphic capacity for reduced aggression, more tolerance, greater cooperation, and social learning. In humans, domestication did not occur by interacting with other species, but emerged as a secondary consequence of evolutionary selection against reactive aggression, which makes less aggressive, more social and cooperative individuals more likely to survive and pass their genes onto the next generation.

The different evolutionary paces of our cooperative and political attitudes, and our ability to think creatively suggest that those traits have emerged independently from one another. It also suggests that teaching hinges on traits which developed for other purposes and independently from each other.

Surveys about teachers' motivations to enter and remain in the profession provide support for the hypothesis of the cooperative and altruistic character of teaching. Studies generally identify three types of motivation to be a teacher: intrinsic, altruistic, and extrinsic (for a review, see Fray and Gore 2018). Intrinsic motivation includes the enjoyment of the subject matter; but this alone does not justify choosing teaching over other professions that offer similar intrinsic satisfaction with better rewards. Extrinsic motivations pertain to the advantages of being a teacher, such as job stability and a good work-life balance. These factors are more significant in the developing world than in the Western world, where teaching often lacks material advantages compared to other professions. Altruistic reasons, that is, the desire to contribute in an important way to the socialization and development of the youth, play an important role in deciding whether to become and remain a teacher (Fray and Gore 2018).

Discussion

The analysis of the nature of teaching carries important implications for contemporary education systems. First, as discussed above, social learning is a multifaceted process that includes not only direct instruction from a more experienced member of society, but also learning through imitation and observation. Recognizing teaching as just one mode within this broader repertoire of social learning highlights the need to give greater prominence to peer-based learning processes. One particularly effective form of social learning is peer collaborative learning. Numerous studies have consistently demonstrated its effectiveness, both in enhancing academic performance consistently with Collaborative Cognitive Load Theory (CCLT) (Kirschner et al. 2018), and in promoting social integration (Slavin 1996; Johnson and Johnson 2009). CCLT theorizes that, under the right conditions, peer collaboration improves learning outcomes by distributing the cognitive load among learners. However, CCLT also cautions that for collaboration to be beneficial at the individual level, tasks must be sufficiently complex to justify the additional time and effort required for coordination and communication. While CCLT offers evidence for efficiency gains from peer-based learning, this article roots such a collaboration in evolved social dispositions like shared intentionality, mind-reading, and altruism. Peer-based learning is therefore not only effective, but a

reflection of our cooperative nature. Notably, peer-based learning is especially conducive to the transmission of cumulative knowledge. There is no straightforward relationship between task complexity and the incidence of teaching across species: even cognitively sophisticated animals rarely teach, as most skills can be acquired through imitation or trial-and-error learning (Laland 2017). In contrast, teaching in humans is particularly effective for transmitting cumulative knowledge that would otherwise be difficult to acquire. While modern education prioritizes individual achievement and short-term assessment outcomes, human teaching historically functioned as a cooperative activity largely decoupled from formal evaluation or extrinsic incentives. Knowledge was shared collectively, often without direct personal gain, yet with transformative and unintended consequences: the accumulation of cultural knowledge across generations. This suggests that the focus of modern teaching on individual achievement and test performance is not only distant from, but potentially in tension with, the cooperative nature of teaching and its long-term cumulative benefits.

Importantly, collaborative learning not only yields cognitive benefits, but it also plays a critical role in reducing intercultural distance among students from diverse backgrounds (Johnson and Johnson 2009). By encouraging dialogue, mutual problem-solving, and shared tasks, peer learning fosters social bonds and challenges prejudice, an outcome that aligns closely with theories of teaching as a fundamentally social endeavour.

Second, the hypothesis that schools indoctrinate students into accepting the values of dominant social groups warrants critical reconsideration. The correspondence principle, as formulated by Bowles and Gintis, suggests that the structure and function of schooling reflect the hierarchical organization of the workplace, thereby preparing students for future labour roles. This interpretation presumes a rigid model of socialization in which students passively internalize dominant norms and values. However, such a view has been criticized for its neglect of human agency, and for conceptualizing cultural learning as a black box. In response to these critiques, Bowles and Gintis (2002) developed a revised framework that avoids the ‘oversocialized’ conception of the individual by drawing on insights from biology, specifically cultural evolution theory and replicator dynamics.

In this reformulation, cultural transmission is understood as dynamic and strategic. Students adopt, retain, or modify cultural traits based on the alignment between parental and educational models, as well as on the perceived payoffs of those traits. Children assess the relative advantages of traits modelled by parents or teachers, often using peers’ experiences as reference points. Traits associated with greater institutional rewards, such as high grades, are more likely to be adopted and disseminated, even if they do not yield long-term benefits for all students. Moreover, the adoption of cultural traits is influenced by the heterogeneity of the student and teacher populations, particularly in terms of their conformity to prevailing social norms. Within any population, some individuals tend to align with existing behaviours endorsed by others, while others pursue novel or non-conforming patterns of behaviour. From this perspective, while schools may indeed facilitate the proliferation of traits advantageous to dominant groups (e.g. employers), they can also function as mechanisms of cultural change rather than mere instruments of social reproduction.

Third, several policy implications follow from the preceding analysis. Anthropological studies of hunter–gatherer societies show that education traditionally serves both to transmit practical skills and to instil social norms essential for group cohesion. In contrast, modern education systems prioritize labour market skills, often at the expense of citizenship education (Hoskins and Janmaat 2019). This imbalance is especially stark in vocational tracks, which tend to exclude subjects that foster political literacy, critical thinking, and civic engagement (Hoskins et al. 2012). To redress this, citizenship education should become a priority across all educational pathways. Bridging the gap between academic and vocational tracks—by integrating general subjects and civic education into vocational curricula—would affirm the equal political agency of all students. Such reforms would help to re-establish education’s broader role in preparing individuals not just as workers, but as active, informed citizens.

Anthropological evidence further indicates that, in hunter–gatherer societies, children often have substantial autonomy over what, how, and from whom they learn; and that teaching occurs through invitation, play, observation, and active participation (Garfield et al. 2016; Hewlett and Roulette 2016; Boyette and Hewlett 2017; Lew-Levy et al. 2017). This evidence stands in contrast to the authoritarian structure of modern systems of education. International evidence indicates that disciplinary practices in contemporary schools often rely on control. While physical punishment remains legally permitted and practised in many countries (Heekes et al. 2022), in Western education systems, non-physical forms of punishment—such as isolation, exclusion from activities, public reprimand, and withdrawal of privileges—are more prevalent and institutionalized (Gregory et al. 2016). These practices are often grounded in behaviourist frameworks that emphasize rule compliance and punishment over autonomy or intrinsic motivation. Such systems contrast sharply with cooperative models of teaching grounded in intrinsic motivation, responsiveness, and trust.

From an evolutionary perspective, these disciplinary norms may hinder, rather than support, the development of the pro-social dispositions that underpin human teaching and learning. This contrast invites a reconsideration of how power and pedagogy are configured in schools, and whether current models foster or inhibit the full human potential of learners.

At a minimum, education systems should move decisively away from punitive disciplinary practices, including non-physical ones. Instead, schools should foster environments where learners are active participants, not passive recipients. This includes involving students in setting classroom rules, co-designing learning goals, and participating in evaluation processes (Biesta 2011). Moreover, curricula should be designed to encourage independent exploration, curiosity, and hypothesis testing, rather than rigid content delivery aimed at standardized test performance. These practices are not only more aligned with the evolutionary roots of teaching as a cooperative activity, but are also supported by research linking student autonomy and participatory learning to higher levels of motivation, critical thinking, and long-term academic success (Zimmerman 2002; Reeve 2006).

Conclusions

The exploration of why humans teach, encompassing both biological and cultural perspectives, reveals a complex interplay of cognitive and social factors. This article critically reviewed the primary hypotheses that teaching is either a cognitive adaptation specifically for transmitting complex knowledge (Caro and Hauser 1992; Kruger and Tomasello 1996; Ziv and Frye 2004; Hoppitt et al. 2008; Strauss et al. 2014), or a cultural product unique to modern industrial societies (Rogoff 2003, 2011; Lancy and Grove 2010; Lancy 2010a,b). Additionally, it introduced a third perspective that regards teaching as a by-product of our broader evolutionary adaptations for sociality and cooperation.

The cognitive adaptation hypothesis posits that teaching evolved to solve adaptive problems, providing a high-fidelity method to transmit complex knowledge efficiently (Caro and Hauser 1992; Kruger and Tomasello 1996; Ziv and Frye 2004; Hoppitt et al. 2008; Strauss et al. 2014). This hypothesis is supported by the sophisticated theory of mind capabilities observed in humans from a young age (Brothers 1990; Adolphs 2003; Behne et al. 2005; Kovács et al. 2010). Studies of hunter–gatherer societies, often considered representative of early human social structures, show that teaching is prevalent even in these communities (for reviews, see Kruger and Tomasello 1996, and Garfield et al. 2016). This suggests that teaching is not exclusively a modern phenomenon, but rather a fundamental aspect of human nature.

On the other hand, the cultural product hypothesis argues that the formal, top-down transmission of knowledge seen in modern educational institutions is a recent development, shaped by the demands of complex, industrial societies. In smaller-scale societies, learning often occurs through observation and imitation, with minimal direct instruction from adults (Rogoff 2003, 2011; Lancy and Grove 2010; Lancy 2010a,b).

The article proposed that teaching might be a by-product of other evolutionary adaptations, particularly those related to our proclivity for cooperation and sociality. Human societies are

characterized by high levels of altruism, cooperation, and social learning, which are crucial for group survival (Herrmann et al. 2007; Bøggild and Petersen 2016; Muthukrishna and Henrich 2016; Gintis 2017; Wrangham 2019). Teaching, in this context, can be viewed as an extension of these social behaviours, facilitated by our advanced theory of mind and communication skills.

The development of theory of mind allows humans to understand and predict others' mental states, making teaching possible by recognizing the knowledge gaps in others and providing appropriate guidance. This capability, combined with our innate tendencies towards altruism and cooperation, suggests that teaching may have evolved not just to transmit complex knowledge, but as part of our broader social toolkit. Moreover, the motivations for teaching, as identified in surveys, often include altruistic reasons, emphasizing the desire to contribute to the socialization and development of others (Fray and Gore 2018). This supports the idea that teaching is intertwined with our social nature and cooperative behaviours.

The review draws upon a wide range of evidence from anthropology, psychology, and educational studies, highlighting the multifaceted nature of teaching. It shows that teaching exists across various cultures, including hunter-gatherer societies, where it plays a role in transmitting both practical skills and social norms.

While the evidence supports elements of both the cognitive adaptation and cultural product hypotheses, it also points to the need for a more nuanced understanding. Teaching appears to be a complex behaviour that likely evolved through multiple pathways, emerging both by direct selection for specific cognitive abilities, and as a by-product of our social and cooperative nature.

It should be noted that while the teaching-as-adaptation and -as-by-product are presented as alternative theories for simplicity, it is possible that they are complementary. Teaching may have initially evolved as a cognitive adaptation for transmitting specific kinds of information, especially in opaque or high-stakes learning domains (e.g. tool use, social norms). Over time, it may have been exapted (repurposed) for more abstract knowledge such as calculus or different purposes such as cooperative interactions. Conversely, teaching may have emerged initially as a by-product of our social inclinations, whereupon natural selection refined it for the purpose of cultural transmission.

In conclusion, teaching is a distinctive human behaviour that integrates cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions. Its prevalence across different societies and its roots in fundamental human traits such as cooperation and mind-reading suggest that it is a multifaceted adaptation.

Such an integrative view not only enriches our grasp of the significance of teaching but also opens up new avenues for educational practice. By appreciating the full spectrum of social learning—including imitation, observation, peer collaboration, and informal guidance—educators can develop more diverse and effective teaching strategies that extend beyond traditional top-down instruction from teacher to student. This holistic approach acknowledges the diverse ways in which knowledge and skills are transmitted, ultimately fostering a more adaptive and responsive educational system.

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