

On Understanding Mosston, Circa 1967

Lawrence F. Locke

Teachers College, Columbia University

There is some ambiguity in the role of the reactor. The reactor may be forced into a role which lacks “authenticity”. The one advantage is the fact that the absence of a clear definition of role invites the reactor to invent his own model for response. The preceding paper seems to call for a response that is both interpretive, in the sense of translating some of its content, and critical, in the sense of indicating elements that require closer examination.

I think that it is impossible to make any real sense out of what Mosston has presented, unless you know a great deal more than is written here about both the man and his ideas. The author and his notions about physical education are now far too big (and perhaps too unruly) to be consumed in polite, small bites. To be specific, I doubt that the present paper will mean much unless you have access to Mosston and his ideas through his new book, *Teaching Physical Education: From Command to Discovery* (Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc., 1966).

There is a problem encountered when dealing with a man who us sequentially developing and expanding a line of thought, and chooses to do so in public. Increasingly, he has to assume that his audience already knows what he thought about last year and the year before that. He must assume that they heard last year’s speeches, read last year’s papers, and read last year’s books. The man who gives the same speech and rewrites essentially the same book over an entire professional lifetime does not face this problem because everyone knows what he said last year. In the case of a man groping his way along a corridor of ideas – it is sometimes difficult to understand him because he is always becoming something else.

Given my privilege as a reactor to provide frank opinion, let me say that I am glad I read his book because it seems worth knowing where he was last year so that I can make sense out of this year's paper. Lest you think that I have transgressed the bounds of good test and plugged a commercial item, his book, let me be more explicit: I *am* plugging his book, but I think it is important for you to understand why. I am recommending the book because I think that it is professionally significant, genuinely new, and gracefully written. I am not plugging it because I agree with it, in the sense of viewing education in the same way that Mosston does, or because he is a personal friend.

There is an instructive apocryphal story about Mosston. After his first book, *Developmental Movement*, was finished, his publishers sent him some reviews. These consisted mostly of the kind that "little, old ladies" write. The reviews glowed with adjectives, such as "stimulating", "important", "exciting", and "incisive". He sent the reviews back to his astounded publisher with a warm note, requesting that they not bother to send any more because, whether they were nice or not, the kind reviewers didn't really have any idea what he was talking about. Now, before you chalk him up as an ingrate, let me remind you of T.S. Elliot's famous remark that the greatest human treason of all is to let someone do the right thing for the wrong reason. That phrase has survived because it's true. It gets to the meat of the human condition. Mosston may have needed the reinforcement of praise very badly, but he understood the terrible treason of accepting it for the wrong reason.

It probably doesn't make any real difference whether you find Mosston's book, or the present paper, to be pretentious, inaccurate and, thus, irrelevant or penetrating, exciting and, thus, useful. It doesn't make any real difference so long as you do so for the

right reason. The only right reason I can think of is having understood what he was trying to say, and then passing your judgment upon it. To make your judgment on secondhand versions of what others think Mosston is saying, or isolated fragments of his thought such as the paper we heard today, is to leave you in the position of arriving at a conclusion about the man and his ideas that may do both of you great injustice.

I want to share with you my understanding of what Mosston is talking about. By translating his words into my own language, perhaps we can place this paper in a broader and more intelligible framework.

Mosston has made the hardly original observation that there are things called educational goals. These are the behaviors which we hope to see displayed by our students when they leave our classes and become adults. Such abstractions are intentions that we have drawn up in our heads, and thus they often seem to lack any kind of immediacy or reality. At the opposite extreme are the children we face day by day in our classes – yelling, sweating, hitting each other and sometimes learning. They are almost oppressively immediate and real. Between the children on the one hand and the goals on the other hand lies the subject matter of physical education. As a Springfield College graduate, I still tend to think of this subject matter in terms of the sports and games that are used as a vehicle to project children toward educational goals. Dr. Fraleigh's earlier paper indicates that other men hold a different view.

This simplistic three-part model (learning – content – objectives) is complicated by the fact that some of us believe that the content is also, at least in part, an objective – but that is another story for another day. More crucial to the present discussion is the fact that Mosston also has observed that teaching methods link learners to subject matter. In

itself, this too is hardly original. The significant and creative observation is that not only do teaching methods facilitate, or fail to facilitate, the process of learning, but that teaching methods have a *direct influence*, in themselves, upon the child's progress toward the educational goals we have selected. In brief, certain methods of teaching lead to certain kinds of learning, and these, in turn, have a direct bearing upon overall behavioral change we see in the child. Teaching methods are a medium of transmission, and *the medium is always a message*. This latter point is not entirely unique in the literature of education, although it is a point only rarely made in the dreary physical education literature concerning teaching methods.

Mosston has observed that we have written and thought a great deal about our goals (philosophy), and the content of physical education (program), and the way in which children learn motor skills (motor learning). Consequently, Mosston decided to apply himself to the one area to which we have given rather little attention – teaching methods. He has thought very deeply about that bridge lying between children and subject matter. Logically, with care and painstaking detail, he has dissected the act of teaching motor skills. You can read the results of this process for yourself. The end result of his analysis was a sequence of organically related styles of teaching. These are the possible behavioral patterns that are the alternatives when we make our teaching decisions. Teachers do make their decisions in terms of one style or another style. At that instant they unleash consequences both for the degree to which the learning of subject matter is facilitated and the degree to which the act of teaching propels the child toward our broad behavioral goals.

Because his book and much of his previous work has been devoted to the anatomy of styles, he has only alluded peripherally to the business of choosing particular styles for particular purposes. How does one decide what style is appropriate under any given set of conditions? I am sure you can guess the factors that would probably enter in. There would be the teacher and his personality, training, and experience. There would be the student and his expectations and his capabilities. There would be the environment – both the physical environment of the gymnasium and field, and the broader cultural environment with all of its powerful influences upon educational matters. Finally, there would be the subject matter itself, including all of the relevant elements within the structure of the skill.

The present paper looks at subject matter as a determining influence in teaching style. How does subject matter help us to logically arrive at choices among various styles of teaching? In a sense, this is a complicated question because it presumes some kind of taxonomy with which to divide a skill into its relevant elements.

This seems to be the least interesting and the least worthy of the possible questions to which Mosston could have given his attention. It seems to me that the other variables – teaching, students, and environments – need dissection much more urgently than the question of the subject matter. Subject matter and its structure is a popular topic in education right now because of the influence of men like Bruner and Ausubel. In physical education, this is doubly true because of the relationship of subject matter to the broader question of our status as a discipline.

Let me suggest some tasks in Mosston's corridor of ideas that seem to me to be much more relevant and important than the task to which this paper was directed.

Mosston has shown relationships between a variety of observations about teaching and learning behavior. He has created a framework for understanding teaching. It permits a teacher to predict events within the teaching act, and perhaps to control it. In other words, he has, in point of fact, constructed a theory or at least a theoretical model.

A good theory must do much more than simply make sense out of other data from which it was spawned. It must make sense out of other data. Indeed, it must predict the existence of other data; events that might first appear discrepant must be accounted for within the confines of a good theory.

Theories that are not thoroughly enough elaborated and exploited to account for events that are seemingly in congenial to their assumptions are dangerously vulnerable. To be more specific, it seems to me that Mosston's model *has not been elaborated so as to help us understand why some teachers cannot use certain styles, or why some students don't learn well under certain styles, or why some environments limit the available choices of style*. Each of these are inevitable encounters for anyone who attempts to think and work within paradigm which Mosston has designed. Unless the theory is publicly elaborated so as to make sense out of what otherwise must be regarded as exceptions to the rule, we run the real danger that the theory will not be given serious attention, simply because it was not made as competent as it could have been.

A related criticism is that Mosston, from our point of view, has engaged in what I like to call "data-free theorizing". His theory lacks the guts of empirically derived evidence. He has three defenses against this accusation. First, he has his own personal data: the thousands of children that he has taught and the hundreds of teachers that he has worked with. The difficulty here is that this kind of data is not easily communicable in any

form that has standing in the court of scholarly judgment. A second defense is the fact that other men with concerns in other subject matter areas have produced some data that obliquely support some of the assumptions used by Mosston. For example, Bruner's newest book concerning cognitive growth is strongly suggestive, though not decisive, in this regard. A third defense is the fact that there is always a stage in our thinking where data-free theorizing is legitimate and necessary. The difficulty here is that I suspect Mosston is now well past the point at which he can remain aloof from empirical questions.

What I am suggesting is that the fun is over, and that *it is now time for the work to begin*. If Mosston thinks that the years of effort he has put into his book were work and not fun, he then confuses the problems of writing and teaching (which, indeed, are work) with model building, which, for a man of his ability and taste, must always be a pleasure.

We must now look at the spectrum of teaching styles and look for questions to ask that are amenable to empirical answers. We must now permit the theory to objectively display the way in which it can be predicted, control, and explain. For example, Mosston says that some styles engage the student's cognitive apparatus in the process of learning and thus leave the student different because of this encounter. The theory makes clear enough *why we* might expect this to be so, but, of course, remains silent as to whether or not in fact it is so. We can never know about cognition directly because, like learning itself, it is only an inference. You never can unscrew the top of a learner's head, and look in to see learning and thinking taking place. The usual technique is to look at subsequent behavior and make assumptions about what and how the student learned.

In more specific terms, I would like to know exactly *what* particular students can retrieve and display in their behavior after an experience of learning volleyball through the teaching style called guided discovery that other particular students cannot retrieve and display after learning volleyball through the command style. If the theory proposes that certain behavioral events should be observed, then let us get busy and find out, indeed, whether they are or not. If things turn out as the theory predicts they will, we then have given the breath of life to what was no more than an inert skeleton. Empirical data are the blood and sinew of our speculation.

Let me close with a short story out of my own immediate past experience. On the way to San Diego, I was sitting in a United Airlines jet mainliner – in the lounge, and alone in the afternoon sun. I had been rereading *From Command to Discovery*, and I had put it down in the seat next to me, face up. I was looking out of the window and thinking of my task as a reactor, when the stewardess came in. She was a young, flimsy thing, about twenty-five; she saw the title of the book and said brightly, “Oh! Are you going to be a gym teacher?” (Having a beard always makes one look younger than one really is.) I said, “Well, yes, you might say so.” She shook her head and looked serious and said, “That’s too bad. You know, that’s the most awful thing about college – those two years they make you take gym.” Then she smiled and, with a little thrusting gesture, said, “But I did learn how to fence.”

I won’t belabor the moral of this little story. I think we have a *good* subject matter. I never feel the need to apologize for teaching sports and games. However, too often, something does go wrong and our colleges do produce results like my little stewardess. These are adults who clearly could have loved movement, but who learned to

hate gym. Why does this happen? It seems probable to me that it has something to do with our style of teaching. And that is why I find Mosston not only personally relevant, but so relevant to the concerns of NCPEAM as well.

Whether you agree or not with what Mosston has to say, please do so for the right reason. Don't take my second hand account, nor that of anyone else. Read his work – understand it – and make your own nontreasonous judgment.