THE TALENTED RECEPTION

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It is the reception, primarily. Otherwise teaching the talented does not differ in very many respects from teaching the average high school student. At least this was my observation last summer at the Twin Cities Institute for Talented Youth in which I assisted Bart McDonough of Minneapolis Marshall High School in a course entitled "Literature: Man's Search for Community." For the first time in my teaching career I was faced with a class of students who elected to take an English course for no credit; indeed they were willing to commute many miles to get that English course. They had to be a different breed of students from those I was used to.

In some respects our students were like any well-behaved class which, through an accident of scheduling, might be belched out of a computer to a fortunate teacher. They were pleasant, mannerly, and regular in their attendance. We were even surprised to find that the range in abilities was as great as it is in many high school classes, certainly as great as in enriched classes. They even had the same old familiar notion that in the end the teacher had the final "appropriate" answer to all the major questions. This, they found, was not the case, for the questions were never "who did what to whom?" But these students came to the class eager, not just willing, but eager to learn.

Probably the greatest pleasure in teaching them came from skipping over the frothy questions of plot and sequence, often even the questions of style and setting. Instead we plunged into the deeper question of why. It was here that these students excelled. It was here that the reception to our teaching made the difference. We never needed to quiz them on whether they had read the material. Generally we simply had to pose a lead question. The instructor became what every teacher hopes to be in a class discussion a moderator.

Since our course attempted to investigate man's search for community, we were faced with the initial question of man's existence: why does man inhabit the earth? Many of our students could answer this

question easily enough through their religious faith. Many others were unwilling to accept any mystical explanation for their existence but chose to believe that there is no purpose in it at all; therefore man must create his own purpose. Both of these lines of reasoning led to the next question: What must man do with his existence? This, then, was the essence of our course, for this was man's search for community.

Since our course was primarily concerned with literature and not philosophy, we attempted to discover what some writers, both ancient and modern, had to say about this search. The most obvious starting point seemed to be Sophocles. We presented a minimum of introduction to the Greek theater and went right on to a discussion of Oedipus' guilt. We traced the tragic hero's futile attempt to outsmart the Fates and the blindness of his stumbling into their hands. The students were especially interested in the idea that Jocasta in her boast that she had outwitted the gods was advocating chaos and the ultimate meaninglessness of life. It was then possible to discuss whether man has an obligation to uphold order in the world and whether he can be happy if he chooses not to.

It soon became evident to the class that we, the instructors, were not going to provide the answers. At first we were reluctant to state our own opinions for fear of squelching discussion. Instead we tried to challenge them to evaluate their own reasoning. We especially wanted them to see their own inconsistencies where they occurred. If their ideas stemmed from personal bias, we wanted them at least to be aware of that fact. We were interested in getting them to think carefully and explore all avenues of reason.

As soon as they realized that they did not have to attempt to read our thoughts in order to guess what we wanted them to say, they began saying the things that occurred to them. They were then willing to attack works which they knew that we instructors enjoyed. They could give us concrete reasons not based on personal bias.

This was the greatest breakthrough in the course, for we were then in the enviable position of being accepted as peers, but respected as teachers. From then on we could provide our own observations and interpretations confident that the discussion would continue to flow.

Apparently ours was not the only course to experience this phenomenon, for at one of our staff

meetings another instructor said, "My students couldn't care less what my interpretation is. They might be mildly interested, but that's all." He made this remark with the same kind of pride that we felt in our class. It no longer mattered what we thought of a given piece of literature because our students were using their own tools to discover for themselves what the author was saying and how well he was saying it.

As we continued in our reading, which was quite extensive (including three novels, four book-length essays, and thirteen plays), we drew comparisons and contrasts among the various authors. It was especially interesting to hear some of the students state that they found more realism in Oedipus Rex than in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. This, of course, prompted a discussion of the meaning of realism or the various meanings of the word. One girl insisted that realism is unimportant, but what is important is what the reader takes away from the work.

Many of the responses made by our students were the same as those that might be made by any group of students in an English class, but they were made voluntarily, without the usual maneuvering on the part of the teacher. And they were made with conviction without agonizing, tooth-extracting hints. Furthermore, no one needed to say anything. We resolved early in the course not to call on anyone who did not volunteer. For a while we thought that this might prove a mistake. Some of our students were letting the others carry on all the discussion. Then we tried a plan of separating the "talkers" from the "non-talkers." As we had hoped, we found that the "non-talkers" responded very well when taken away from those who they admitted overawed them in the larger group. This was primarily because two or three were far more articulate than the others. The rest, and especially the younger ones such as the ninth graders, had to search harder for the appropriate words. These students benefited, nevertheless, from exposure to peers who were often as articulate as their instructors.

As the weeks of the institute wore on, we found that we were in danger of losing some of our students' enthusiasm simply because of the great bulk of assigned reading. Therefore we discarded three or four books that we had intended to assign in addition to those already mentioned. Instead we showed several films, both feature length and shorter. Happily, we discovered that these served not only as a pause in the work but as a launch for further discussion.

Students especially responded to Ingmar Bergman's Seventh Seal and the British documentary The War Game.

The most interesting observation that came from a student after the showing of The War Game came as a result of a question in the film. The question was: Should we retaliate if we are attacked with nuclear weapons? One girl felt that we should not. "At least half the world," she said, "would be left. Even if it's not our half, it's people. What would we prove by destroying the other half?" Many in the class agreed with her rather mature response.

This response occurred on the last day of the institute, and it made both Mr. McDonough and me feel rather satisfied that the class had been a success, for it showed that our students were leaving our institute with some concern for humanity and its direction. Nearly every discussion that had occurred had gotten round to the idea that basically what humanity needs is concern for one another, or "The Art of Loving" as Erick Fromm presents it.

Our class was conceived with the intention of treating high school students as adults and expecting adult responses in return. Their responsiveness was just what we had hoped it would be. They proved equal to the task. It was their reception to our teaching that marked them as talented youth.

List of Readings:

Aeschylus:	The Agamemnon The Libation Bearers The Eumenides
Albee, Edward:	The American Dream The Zoo Story
Buber, Martin:	Good and Evil
Camus, Albert:	The Myth of Sisyphus
Chekhov, Anton:	The Three Sisters
Conrad, Joseph:	Heart of Darkness
Fromm, Erick:	The Art of Loving
Hoffer, Erick:	The True Believer
Miller, Arthur:	The Crucible Death of a Salesman

O'Connor, Edwin:	The Edge of Sadness
Shakespeare, William:	King Lear
Sophocles:	Oedipus the King Oedipus at Colonus Antigone
Waugh, Evelyn:	The Loved One
Weiss, Peter:	Marat Sade

Dan Kreuger, English teacher at North High School, Minneapolis, was an assistant teacher in the Twin Cities Institute for Talented Youth in the summer of 1967.

"THE SNOW SWEEPS BY"

By CECIL JONS
Cloquet High School

the snow sweeps past
to coat the earth
a casket white of
shell and down

rain, rain, rolls by
on March's arm
to sate the thirst
of shell-like buds

the clutch of winter
slips, yet grasps
stays life with old
and rotten breath

life's golden ally
circles round
laughs light at
our perplexity

then reaching down
one sparkling day
melts winter's stagnant
crust away