"Teach Their Souls To Fly"

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To give wings to a student's soul is something devoutly to be wished. Only once, in twenty years of teaching, have I felt certain that I had succeeded. The salutatorian at a high school graduation, a well-liked boy, student body officer and outstanding athlete as well as excellent student, ended this talk by saying that, of all the experiences he had had in high school, the one that was most meaningful was his having learned, in his senior English class, to love poetry, and having discovered, through poetry, new ways to look at the world, at others, and at himself. Probably no one else at that graduation, including the student speaker, remembers what was said, but the boy's words have remained indelibly in my mind. There have been other, private, knowings and often suspicions of partial success, but however many souls have taken flight have done so, I believe, because of my commitment to an ideal of humanistic teaching. It's an ideal I will never reach, but one I must strive toward for as long as I shall teach.

It begins with an adherence to the Plato-Rousseau-Dewey philosophic line. Like Plato, I believe that the ultimate end of education is insight into the harmonious order of the cosmos and the development of virtue, or goodness, in the human soul. With Rousseau I hold that we must educate children as children. As he says in the Emile, "Nature wants children to be children before they are men.. ..Childhood has ways of seeing, thinking and feeling peculiar to itself: nothing can be more foolish than to seek to substitute our ways for them." And I agree with Dewey's basic tenets: that education is rooted in the experience of the individual, that education is a process of growth with being as the end, and that education in a democracy means the education of the individual self.

My theory of instruction grows from these philosophic seeds and has been nourished especially by the insights of Rogers, Maslow, Jung, and Ashton-Warner. It is oriented

toward human, democratic values and has at its core a concern for the student. This concern in turn implies an emphasis on the teacher as a person, for although we teachers may utilize any kind of machine or non-human device in our process of instruction, the way we do this, the reasons for doing it, and the effectiveness in the eventual learning all relate essentially to the teacher as person.

Carl Jung said that the student learns from what the teacher is, not from what he knows. If you recall your own elementary and secondary years, you will remember teachers who stifled learning and some who stimulated it, who served as models. You will remember interactional experiences but you will be unlikely to remember any specific knowledge that a given teacher transmitted to you. What teachers are, then, is of foremost importance. What we teach--the content of our courses, and how we teach--the mehtods we employ--are secondary.

If this is true in general, it is specifically so in English. John Ciardi, in a talk given some years ago to the Wyoming Education Association, pointed out the importance of the teacher as person in the teaching of English. He said that if students had a mediocre teacher in chemistry, for instance, they would not learn quite as much as they would if they had an excellent teacher. Nor would any likely be inspired to continue in the study of that science. They would, though, learn something simply by reading the text and doing the experiments. But in English, if they had a mediocre teacher they would not simply learn a bit less but would actually regress in their learning. That is, they would develop negative attitudes toward language, literature, and writing. The student, therefore, who might have "learned" Macbeth enough to pass a test in which he or she could properly identify the characters, events, and even thematic ideas, but whose reaction was one of disliking the play intensely, learned this from the teacher, not from Shakespeare.

What must we teachers be, then, to make instruction effective? First, I believe, we must try to be fully-functioning persons. Such persons have a good self image, see themselves as part of a world in movement--in the process of becoming, and accept the dynamic of change. Further, such persons see the importance of people, hold human values, and live in keeping with those values. To

them life means discovery and adventure and they flourish because they are in tune with the universe.

Such fully functioning persons would be likely to hold attitudes that facilitate learning. One of these is having respect for the student as an individual. This seemingly obvious attitude is one that, perhaps more than any, is violated by teachers. Not only in the Boston and New York ghettos, from whose bowels have come the rumblings of the educational acidity which burns the very souls of the children, but even in the affluent suburbs teachers all too often speak of their students--those who are not superior academically--in derogatory terms.

Closely allied to respect for the individual is an empathic understanding of persons. To "learn to walk in someone else's mocassins," as the Shoshone Indians express empathy, is not easy, but unless we as teachers can do this, we cannot be fully effective. This means that we must understand our students from the inside, must formulate our teaching goals from the students' point of view. If we cannot imagine what it would be like never to have experienced success in school, year after year to have unwillingly warmed a seat in the back row, to have had the self-image stamp of failure pressed indelibly on one's soul, how can we hope to reach or teach those who have known only failure. And if we cannot empathically shed our white skins and our suburban values, how can we reach the black, red, or brown student, or the inner-city student, whatever the color.

If we respect our students and attempt to empathize with them, it is easy to have faith in them, too. If, for instance, Joe and Sue know that their teacher believes that they <u>can</u> write a short story, they may surprise themselves by writing one. This is not the same thing as the self-fulfilling prophecy, but it is related. The difference is that the expectation is not based on some information--such as high I.Q.'s--but on an inherent faith that everyone has far greater potentiality than is ever used and that, if this faith can be communicated, it can indeed move mountains.

Fourth, and equal in importance, is to be open and honest. Students know when we are putting them on, when we are not being honest. They can see through a busywork assignment, for instance, and not only will they do it--if they do--knowing full well that it is unimportant, but the act of doing it will have a negative effect on their

learning. Or teachers who give a writing assignment for the purpose of having a grade to record in their little black books are not fooling any students, and the degree of learning that results will be insignificant. Being honest means also to be ourselves, to be persons who can make mistakes and admit to making them, can get angry or tired or annoyed at times without taking these feelings out on our students. It means not only accepting and expressing our own feelings but being able to accept the feelings of our students. Students tend, almost universally, to think of their teachers as <u>teachers</u>, not as human beings. Seeing us as real persons, I believe, facilitates learning. Also if we are honest with ourselves, we can the more easily be honest with our students.

Only if we are striving toward becoming fully-functioning persons with the attitudes described above can our primary concern be for our students. And if our instruction is student-centered it will affect not only what we teach but how we teach. The what of teaching--the knowledge that we are trying to instill--is essentially self-knowledge. Skills are taught, of course, and facts. But knowledge, I believe, is that which is expressed in the words of the Delphic oracle, the cornerstone of Socrates' teachings: know thyself. When one knows what a flower is, for instance, the knowledge is essentially that of the relation of oneself to the flower. Any facts that one may know--how many stamens, how many petals--are extraneous to the real knowing.

It is possible to learn without knowing, but if learning is to be meaningful it must be learning that can be equated with knowing. This means that it must be known inside, or known at the gut-level. When one knows something in this sense the knowledge is a part of him or her and thus such knowledge is self-knowledge or self-discovery. Teachers who view knowledge in these terms, then, will be concerned primarily in the act of instruction with students' gaining this knowledge of themselves. For example, if one teaches poetry as a body of facts to be learned <u>about</u> poetry, the student will not gain any <u>knowledge</u> of poetry. But if one teaches it as a gateway to self-knowledge, not only will the student more likely gain a knowledge of poetry but the poetry that is taught--the specific what--will be selected because it may lead to this self-knowledge.

Not only the specific whats of instruction but the hows as well follow from the concept that meaningful learning is knowledge and knowledge is self-discovery.

Students, for example, must be involved in the learning process. They cannot be passive receivers of information given by the teacher, but must be active participants. They must discover the knowledge for themselves if it is to become a part of them. This means that the teacher will employ a method that calls for a maximum amount of student involvement. As an example, for the culmination of a unit on drama in my last year of high school teaching all 57 students in the two senior English classes, working in groups of six or seven, wrote and produced dramatic adaptations of short stories. All of the students appeared on stage in roles they had helped to create, and for three nights relatives, friends, and other townspeople filled the school auditorium. Through this complete involvement and full experiencing of drama they came to a better understanding of drama and more importantly of themselves and others.

Experience and involvement are closely allied, so that if we teach with a method that calls for student involvement we will also teach with an experiential approach. Unless students experience what is taught, either directly or vicariously, they cannot make that which is taught a part of themselves. Experience also ties together the what and the how, for if the emphasis is on the experiential as the how of teaching, it follows that the what will be that which students <u>can</u> experience, or relate to their experience.

Implicit in what has been said so far is the concept that learning is growth, specifically growth in self-knowledge or self-discovery. This in turn affects the entire instructional procedure, for growth in self-knowledge means growth in self-fulfillment. If we view learning as a constant becoming, what we do as teachers will be determined in large part by the ultimate goal of the fully-functioning self and the immediate goal of taking students from their own points on their own continuums of becoming and leading them toward some point further along. The three-thousand year old Chinese book of wisdom, the <u>I Ching</u>, says "when the student is ready the teacher appears." The student cannot learn, in other words, until he or she is ready to learn for just as learning is growth, so growth determines the learning that can take place.

When we accept this concept, we know that learning will not take place unless there is a readiness or set. Just as one cannot teach a two month old child to talk because he is not <u>ready</u> yet to learn to talk, so one cannot

teach the concept of tragedy until the student is ready to learn it. This readiness or set must be physical, mental, and psychical. Again the whats and hows of instruction are affected by the concept, for we then teach students what they are ready to learn and in a way that will enable them to grow from the learning. We must get the student ready for our message, whatever it may be, by responding <u>to</u> the student, not expect the student to relate to us. Classroom interaction becomes not a questioning and answering of factual information, but a discussion of ideas and of feelings. Growth takes place as one develops the concepts which emerge from thinking, sensing, feeling, intuiting. Thus in the classroom, the teacher encourages students to express their ideas, their feelings, and not to parrot the teacher's ideas.

Starting, then, with the concept that learning is growth, I believe that the way to realize the greatest potential growth is to involve students as fully as possible and to guide their learning through the experiential approach. Employing this method and this approach will lead to meaningful learning--to learning that is inside, that is a part of the whole person. Such learning is knowledge in the sense that it leads to self-discovery, and this in turn means the discovery of the self holistically, that is discovery of the self as it relates to and is a part of the universe. Since acquiring such knowledge is, in my opinion, the goal of education, it follows that the student--the one who is to gain this knowledge--must be the center of concern in the educational process. We can succeed in putting the student at the center of concern if we are honest, have faith in our students, have an empathic understanding of them, and respect them as individuals. We must accept the dynamic of change, be in the constant process of becoming, and hold human values as the ultimate values in life. If we are such teachers, we can give wings to our students; can, in truth, teach their souls to fly.

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