

The Culturally Disadvantaged Teacher

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We are all experts on the culturally disadvantaged teacher just as the criminal is an expert on crime. I am deeper in crime than many of you; I have the advantage (?) of being not only a teacher of adolescents but also a parent of two teenagers.

I would not presume to tell you what the culturally disadvantaged teacher is, what the generation gap is, or how we can close the gap, assuming we want to. But I would like to share with you some thoughts about the gap -- or, sometimes more appropriately, the cavern.

In thinking about whatever it is that separates me from my students, apart from our traditional concepts of the "proper" student-teacher relationship and the adolescent rebellion against authority, I find it helpful to review what has gone into the background of our students in the last five to ten years. It was about ten years ago that we had the advent of space exploration with the flight of Sputnik. In the past five years alone we have lived through the assassinations of President Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Lincoln Rockwell, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy (wouldn't our confidence in social order have been shaken?). We have been seeing more and more nudity in movies and increasing frankness in use of language in movies, on TV, and in print; and TV has been an everyday fact of life from birth for students we have in our secondary schools today. There has been increasing public debate on abortion and increasing organized youth-group discussion of whether pre-marital sex is justifiable, the answer often being "yes." We have seen church members demonstrating against their own clergymen; we have seen rioting in the streets and student demonstrations at colleges across the country. We have seen the escape impulse in the Hippie movement and in experimentation with marijuana, LSD, and other mind-expanding drugs. Within the past year we saw a children's crusade to elect a president and a Southern racist seriously campaigning and winning considerable support for the Presidency.

If any one of these things had happened during our own growing-up years, it would have been a significant influence. Now, the quickened pace of events and their sheer numbers have combined to produce a student different from any we have known before. My answer, then, to the question "Is there an ever-widening difference between the culture of students and that of

teachers?" is "yes."

Having made that observation, what do I do next? What do I do with myself, my students, my classroom? I had the opportunity last summer to experiment with some answers to these questions while teaching a class on protest literature at the Twin City Institute for Talented Youth. We considered in a seminar-discussion format such works as Summerhill, Autobiography of Malcolm X, Death at an Early Age, Looking Backward, and Anthem. It was, of course, a quite atypical situation, but I learned or was reminded of several truths: 1. I don't have to be at the center of the stage at all times. 2. Examination of values is what is really important. 3. Students need to talk. 4. "Good" students also smoke cigarettes and experiment with drugs and sex. 5. I really am over thirty.

I'm the kind of English teacher who enjoyed teaching Silas Marner to my 11th grade students six or eight years ago and thought they benefited from reading it once they got through that impossible, difficult exposition at the beginning. I wouldn't consider teaching Silas Marner today -- not because I've changed that much, but because my students have changed to the extent that no matter what gymnastics I went through or what psychedelic experiences I could work in, they would not have become turned on by the time George Eliot and I finished moralizing at them at the conclusion of the book.

I have also enjoyed teaching Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities and would again teach it if it seemed appropriate. A Tale of Two Cities does, I believe, speak to students and would turn them on today. In fact, Dickens' beginning paragraph with "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" is not unlike the way one might describe our society today. Students could relate rather easily, I think, to that demonstration we call the French Revolution, as well as to the repeated movement back and forth between London and Paris.

I guess what I'm saying is that in selecting fiction today, culturally disadvantaged as I am, I would look for, among other things, movement and dramatic confrontation of values.

What do I do with myself, with my classroom? I try to start by recognizing a few important factors. One of these is students' hypercritical sensitivity to adult duplicity and the near-universal, almost official, teenage rejection of phoniness. Related to this condition is the anti-establishment current which some of us find rather disturbing. However, I believe we need to recognize this current as a reality, not in the sense of "violence is as American as cherry pie," but in the sense of the Newsweek article (Sept. 1968) on Dr. Spock which pointed out that anti-establishmentarianism is a strain in the American

character and that it seems to be a trait nurtured in American families generally, for, while the study cited in the article showed that German mothers tended to rate obedience as the trait they most desired to see developed in their children, American mothers tended to rate obedience last in a list of ten traits they most valued in their children. At any rate, in my classroom I would try to avoid what-is-the-younger-generation-coming-to speeches, the kind I heard were being given in a city classroom a few weeks ago. From my informant's description of the teacher's speech to the class, it seems that nothing could have been better calculated to alienate those students -- at least the more sensitive, thoughtful ones.

I need, further, to try to understand the simplistic, escapist appeal of the Hippie movement for our own flower children. And, unless I want to continue to encourage kids to learn more outside of school than they do in, I need to use a multiplicity of values, media, and experiences in the classroom, not with the hope of competing successfully with non-school life but with the hope of somewhere along the line touching something of significance, stimulating a perception, evoking an aesthetic response that contributes to students' intellectual or emotional growth.

Finally, I need to recognize the central importance of confrontation of values, for isn't that what life and literature are all about? Only through consideration of alternatives, whether presented by students, teacher, or writer, can students productively examine and develop their own values. I couldn't agree more with the English consultant for Minneapolis, Seymour Yesner, who wrote in his September Newsletter, "... the best thing a teacher can do is avoid the issue [of what is morally uplifting] and go about his business of extending students' experiences through as wide a range of books as possible."

As a partial response to my finding myself with students different from those I had known before, I have become involved in helping to develop an experimental course in American civilization. Our major goal was to put together some of the fragments of American history and American literature to enable students to cope more effectively with the realities of American society today. We have incorporated a variety of experiences and activities with a multi-media approach and are using small and large group discussions, a variety of materials (new and old literature, magazines, newspapers, etc.), outside speakers, movies, slides, and records. We emphasize the examination of values -- students', teachers', writers', society's -- and feel, with Dr. Fader, that students themselves need to make at least some choices regarding curriculum and materials if we really want them to learn. We cannot yet determine what degree of success we have had except that the level of student interest seems high,

if only because of the variety of materials and activities.

There are a couple of questions I faced when I resolved to narrow the gap between myself as teacher and my students. The first is, "How can teachers identify with students when this often leads to confrontations with other teachers and administrators?" This seems to me to be a question of teaching versus non-teaching. One needs to ask himself, "Shall I take a chance or shall I play it safe?" We are all experts at playing it safe -- avoiding the questions or answers that lead to confrontation, diverting attention from the truth that needs telling, following the path of least resistance. If we are truly to teach, we shall have to be willing to have confrontations with colleagues. To paraphrase Burke's statement "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men remain silent," all that is necessary for the triumph of non-teaching is that teachers seek to avoid confrontations -- with students, other teachers, or administrators.

The second question, "Is the teacher's professional responsibility primarily to the student or to school officials?" is easy to answer. To neither of those. The teacher's primary responsibility is to himself as a professional. This is the only way to elicit what is best in all of us -- and isn't that what we as English teachers try to do with our students? Granted, even with common sense and discretion, there is some danger of a teacher's using poor judgment, making a bad decision, or becoming apathetic. But don't we have to believe we get better results from encouraging teachers to use their own best professional judgment in making decisions and planning classroom activity? And isn't it always potentially dangerous to encourage people to think for themselves?

To produce thinking, responsive individuals has always been our goal -- there has always been a "clear and present danger," especially for English teachers. I'm confident that we have the nerve to face the dangers, the resources to narrow the gap, and the will to make the English classroom an increasingly more relevant and significant factor in our students' lives. We really can't afford not to.

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