

# Me? The Teacher?

## What Happens When Students and Teachers Change Roles

By CAROL LERFALD  
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SCENE: Senior Drama Class

ACTION: Assignment of "Independent Study Projects"

DIALOGUE: Student: "When is it due?"

Teacher: "April 15th."

Student: "How long does it have to be?"

Teacher: "I don't want to be dogmatic about length but I don't see how you could possibly cover the topic in less than 15 pages."

Student: "TYPED pages?????????"

The bell saved me from continuing this depressing conversation which deflated my hopes of teaching an exhilarating semester of drama. When John, my fellow team member, and I had first organized our syllabus, we had carefully included multi-media presentations, field trips to live productions, and the study of contemporary provocative plays.

We had planned the course with great idealism but it seemed as though even the most attractive opportunities would not infect our school-weary seniors with excitement. In fact, their passive reactions were an ironic contrast to our initial enthusiasm! When we sat down to discuss our problem, we regretted that they had not been present at our earlier planning sessions. As we had developed the materials, our interest had grown. Would this also happen to our students? How would they feel about drama if they worked out the details themselves? Would they become more engaged with the product if they helped participate in the process?

We knew that they were reacting as they did in many classes and that their indifference was sometimes accepted

as an inevitable part of their role as students. In the theatre, an actor's gestures are determined by his part; in life, too, certain responses are expected for certain roles. Those who violate these expectations make headlines: "Mother Abandons Baby!", "Priest Marries Nun!" These stories are newsworthy because they contradict firmly established roles.

Similarly, in the school setting, certain stock responses have almost become reflexes. Consider, for example, what behavior is expected of the principal, the custodian, and the coach. Certainly, no two roles are more clearly defined than student and teacher. Unfortunately, the following description seems to sum up the role of student:

"Now what is it that students do in the classroom? Well, mostly they sit and listen to the teacher... Have you ever heard of a student taking notes on the remarks of another student? Probably not. Because the organization of the classroom makes it clear that what students say is not the content of the classroom."

What other actions characterize the role of student? How about tardiness, cheating and incompetence? The pervasiveness of these negative habits can be shown by requiring teachers to fill our questionnaires or take tests in a style reminiscent of their student days. Ordinarily intelligent people fumble around, ask obvious questions, and fail to follow even simple directions. This ineptitude differs from the normally efficient behavior of the professional teacher.

John and I concluded that our students, too, were only performing as expected. They were seniors and were expected to be tired of school; we were teachers and were expected to fight the malaise. In order to combat these expectations, we decided on a rather drastic strategy. We would refuse to fight our roles; instead, we would switch them!

This meant that we would retire from directing and lecturing and that our students would assume these duties as teachers. For the second nine-week period, they would research and present the material for the course, while we would act as "curriculum consultants and supervisors." We initiated the switch by giving them a comprehensive list of playwrights, from which to choose one as a specialty.

At the end of the first quarter, they would each have to teach this specialty, so they began reading plays, reviews, and biographies, recording their impressions in lesson plan journals, which we periodically read and evaluated.

Their selections added some unusual contributions to the usual drama survey. One girl, working on Shaw, picked Mrs. Warren's Profession as her key example. I would have never used it, but it was one of the more intensely discussed readings of the semester. Another student, who was interested in Russian literature and history, chose Maxim Gorky as his writer, someone we have always omitted as too difficult.

When the second quarter started, our students were assigned a list of readings which had been prepared by their peers. Since our school, on modular scheduling, uses a variety of instructional modes, the demands on the teachers were quite diverse. They wrote lectures and rehearsed dramatizations for large group and created discussion questions for small group. Many of them gave quizzes on material they required of the class. These they also corrected and graded and were surprised when an occasional argument ensued over ambivalent test items. When this occurred, it became a valuable learning experience on the complexity of the communication process, not just another "hassle" with a "dumb teacher."

Other side effects developed which we explained with our role conversion theory. For instance, students are expected to be anxious about grades, but during our role reversal, grade talk almost disappeared. It was replaced by statements like "You really should read this play more than once," and "I hope you guys get something out of our discussion." One boy, notorious for his indifference to grades, assignments, and even other students, puzzled at length over why "the kids didn't really understand Ibsen." Without our coercion, a desirable attitude was expressed, the attitude that "...the acquisition of knowledge and skills are valuable, not in the service of competition for grades, but as the means for personally significant interaction with others."<sup>2</sup>

Efficiency is expected of teachers, but they despair of creating it in their students. Here again, our teachers checked on details, were early for class, and even nagged us about duplicating materials. They scurried around looking for additional resources from other teachers and

libraries, and no one "forgot" his responsibilities or was not ready to teach on his day.

Finally, our student teachers demonstrated sophistication and insight when analyzing even difficult authors. We had thought that when they confronted Shakespeare and Strindberg independently, without the close guidance of a teacher, they would be discouraged by their complexity. When they expressed sympathy and admiration for their authors, we attributed it to the long period of research and the purpose which directed it. As teachers, they were forced to read the literature in a new way. Which play was most interesting? What motivated the writer? These questions they had to ask and answer for themselves. In doing so, they became involved with the playwright they were studying.

Although we were satisfied with the quality of the lessons, we admitted that facets of literary criticism were neglected which we might have emphasized if we were teaching. However, since the students had read extensively in one rather narrow area, they were equipped with some expertise, at least with one writer. Therefore, we felt that depth was not sacrificed, and the students seemed confident in their presentations.

After the semester ended, our students endorsed the experience as interesting and worthwhile. They agreed that not all the teachers had been equally impressive, but still they felt they had learned much about drama, especially from their own teaching. This subjective evaluation confirms the findings Reissman and associates present in their survey of tutorial programs, Children Teach Children (1971). When students teach others, extraordinary leaps in achievement occur in the tutor.

Perhaps this is because teaching provides motivation for a student to test his knowledge by communicating it to others. This is why Charles Silberman, in Crisis in the Classroom, recommends that every college student do some teaching in his own field, even if he is not planning to teach. Since teachers often say, "I never knew a thing until I had to teach it," why should they always dominate a position that results in so much learning?

The absorption of subject matter, though, is not the only justification for role shifting. Could it not also begin to cure a common malady of too many students? This



malady Jerome Bruner diagnosed not as a "lack of freedom," but as a "lack of aim," caused in part by our overly long postponement of vocational choices. He noted that "At the very moment the young man or woman is seeking authenticity, the only legitimate role that is open to him is that of student."<sup>5</sup> Without a vocational goal this role may seem meaningless, and even when it is directed by a specific objective, it is still defined as passive and dependent.

We discovered that role changing did cause a renewed feeling of participation and that our trade off increased dialogue in the classroom. Our students asked us, "Is teaching this hard for you?" "Do you know all this stuff?" Interaction among the students became more serious and vital. They worked hard for clarity and coherence when they saw their friends actually taking notes from their lectures.

A more cooperative community of learners developed when we assigned adult roles to our students. Our encouraging experience suggests that role changing should be explored by teachers in other disciplines and grade levels. Students teaching students might "...help get us an inch on the way toward making the helper and the helped the universal exchange within a culture that continues to produce lonely crowds, lonelier than ever."<sup>4</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, Teaching As A Subversive Activity, (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 22-23.

<sup>2</sup>Herbert A. Thelen, "The Humane Person Defined" (Paper presented at the Secondary Education Leadership Conference, St. Louis, Mo., Nov. 1967), as cited in Frank Reissman et. al., Children Teach Children, (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p.6.

<sup>3</sup>Jerome Bruner, "The Uses of Immaturity," Intellectual Digest (Feb. 1973), p. 43.

<sup>4</sup>Jerome Bruner, "Toward a Sense of Community," Saturday Review-Education (Jan. 15, 1972), p. 63.

## The State We Are In, Or Appear To Be: Final Report Of The Censorship Survey

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After the results of the preliminary survey were announced in the winter issue of the Minnesota English Journal, the Censorship Committee received an additional twenty-four filled-in questionnaires, increasing the sample by a third. This final report is based on the total number of one-hundred responses received. Despite publication of the questionnaire in various organizational bulletins, newspapers, and journals, over 90% of the survey participants were reactions to the questionnaire's appearance in the MCTE Newsletter. Below is the final tally. Where questions were not answered, the total sum is less than 100%. Where people filled in more than one blank, where appropriate, the totals exceed 100%. We will deal in percentiles, but the reader can convert to numbers easily. Some of the results were unchanged, while others were altered significantly.

1. What is your official school title? 64% of the respondents were teachers. 20% classed themselves as chairpersons of grades or departments. 7% were librarians, while another 2% called themselves media specialists or coordinators.
2. Level of school? 51% were secondary school personnel. 39% came from elementary or middle schools, virtually the same as in the preliminary survey.
3. In the past 3 years has anyone objected to or asked you to remove any work? 29% of the respondents cited 33 specific incidents, an increase of 10%. 71% took the time and effort to say no such attempts or objections had been made. Questions had been asked about certain books, but in some cases, no formal protests were made.