On Teaching and Learning

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On Teaching and Learning publishes articles and essays on aspects of pedagogical practice and on research that has implications for teaching.

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On Teaching and Learning

1
How I Could Have Done Much Better
John Kenneth Galbraith

5
How Students Learn
Ellen J. Langer

10
Balancing Teaching and Writing
David Riesman, Daniel Bell, Helen Vendler, and Stephen Jay Gould

17
The Stresses of Beginning Teaching
Carola Eisenberg

22
Real Teaching
Andrew C. Garrod

30
The Contributors
Real Teaching

Andrew C. Garrod

“You’re just the sort of chap we’re looking for,” said the Headmaster of Marlborough College, jabbing his spittle-ended pipe at me as we patrolled the school grounds in Spring. He, Prince Philip-like, one hand clasped in the other behind his back, me, in the final week of my Diploma in Education year at Oxford, anxious to impress but vaguely uneasy. “In a couple of years I don’t see why you couldn’t make yourself useful around the Lower Fourth’s play. And the Second Six at tennis — they’ve been looking for a master who can accompany them on away games.” He eyed me Watchfully. “There’s absolutely bags of opportunity for you here.” Endless years of working up the professional ladder, plays with all male casts, the baroque twitterings of housemasters’ tea-parties and Now Thank We All Our Gods echoing every Commemoration from the chapel vault. All orderly, hierarchical, predictable if you played by the rules. The script was written: I’d only have to play my part; and my private school background had prepared me for that.

Twenty five years later, a continent but not a world away from Marlborough, I stood on the green grass of Dartmouth College and stared at flimsy shanties; shacks raised by students in anger against man’s inhumanity to man, stark against the pristine buildings, mute reminders of two realities, privilege and lack of privilege. Here, too, I was not to escape from the past. Here, too, I was to be formulated, fixed, “sprawling on a pin,” “wriggling on the wall.” The words of a golden haired young sophomore were to resurrect feelings of disquiet — to remind me of why my intended two year moratorium away from England had turned into a lifelong exile.

A mundane experience, a conversation with a student after a class in moral development and moral education; surprisingly it had the power to jolt me from my comfortable reality and reveal a world half-submerged, almost forgotten. As he left my office, he turned, “Professor Garrod,” he queried, “Would I be right in assuming you are a moderate authority in a minor field?” My response came quickly, almost too quickly, “Some would say I was a minor authority in a moderate field.” The forced, wan smile camouflaged my memory of emotions which had lain dormant for twenty-five years. His seemingly innocuous question spoke to me from my past. Are you anyone I need to reckon with? Should I care about impressing you? What is your role in this play and how should I play my part in this scene? Questions irrelevant to “real” teaching and learning.

The Dartmouth incident, it occurs to me, was no less charged with hierarchical concerns than the laconic interview on the Wiltshire playing fields. Marlborough and Dartmouth, Dartmouth and Marlborough. Continents apart, half a lifetime apart; so different, so much the same. I never did teach at Marlborough, having decided I wasn’t the sort of chap they were looking for. Whatever logic there is that can be imposed on the motivations, preoccupations, and decisions that mark my teaching career, I like to think, reflects a concern with privilege and class, justice and fairness. Education for me is liberation — not entrapment nor endorsement of a system of privilege, of class — not about setting apart or about social and academic pigeon holes.

Sometimes, tasks set for us by others force us to see our experiences in a different light. The assignment given me by this journal’s editors makes me wonder where my teaching has cut through to the bone, been most “real.” It compels me to reach to an answer by indirection, by images caught in a moment which somehow point to an answer.

Five weeks before my final exams in English at Oxford I had an emergency appendectomy. As I lay in my bed at the Radcliffe Infirmary two days after the operation, the Rev. Arthur Woolley, career guidance officer for the University, walked into the ward. “What do you think about my doing a Diploma in Education year here, sir? Would it stand me in good stead?” I queried. Mr. Woolley clutched the metal end of my bed and bent forward — conspiratorial among friends. “If a fourth year at Oxford can help eradicate a regional accent I’m all for it, but in your case, old man, you’d just be wasting your time.” Advice not dissimilar to that he had given my friend Bob Jackson, a grammar school boy from Northern England: “If you’re expecting to get an interview at a private school, a good start would be to get a parting in your hair.”

If I shrank from Mr. Woolley’s limited conception of teaching training, his notion of education as refinement, his elitism, I was also horrified by the world of public secondary education found at Birmingham Secondary Modern School where I filled in some weeks later as a supply teacher. “Just keep the kids occupied and out of trouble.”
The Devil makes work for idle hands, you know,” advised Headmaster Bodenham, Justice of the Peace. “They don’t like work at this time of year, most of them, but they’re quite partial to Sports Quizzes.” School books were not allowed out of the classrooms (since everyone knew that if they were, they would be immediately destroyed) and were incarcerated in cages with massive padlocks. However, the boys and girls were always quicker to plug the locks with chewing gum at the start of classes than teachers were to reach for the keys. So improvisation and tumult were the order of the day. Only the carpentry teacher, grimly wielding a weathered piece of 2” by 4”, warded off the daily onslaught of obscenity, anger and frustration.

The utter helplessness of the inmates with their caged books, the lack of academic expectation, the denigration of the students through intimidation and a view of Education as Distraction appalled me. It seemed that being a teacher in the public or private sectors would involve me in compromises I felt unready to make. What I had uniquely to offer could not be recognized and appreciated in such settings. And so I emigrated to Canada — to the industrial and dilapidated port city of Saint John, New Brunswick and to Saint John High School, a public school, that drew its students from all social strata (private schools in the Maritimes being mainly refuges for the abandoned and delinquent). Almost by default, I stumbled into the role of drama director and stayed there for the next sixteen years, moving from traditional presentations of “Twelfth Night” and “The Yeoman of the Guard” to more adventurous productions of “The Roayl Hunt of the Sun,” “West Side Story,” “The Glass Menagerie,” “School for Scandal,” and “Poor Bitos” (and, to my shame, only one Canadian play). The drama program became so all encompassing for me (and probably for the school) that it was on the stage — the main proscenium arch and the intimate apron-stage theatre — that I felt myself most effective as teacher. Here, in fact, as I now realize, was my first real teaching. Encouragement of a mutual respect that must exist between learners - teacher and student, student and student; engagement of students on both emotional and intellectual levels; opportunity for the construction of their own knowledge. Trust, risk taking — all this, on reflection, is real teaching. Through drama, by careful casting I could reconcile the warring factions in the school — unite hockey star and academic in amity. And as I worked on plays, I changed from rehearsing scenes with a pre-set vision of how the end product should look and sound to a far greater concentration on process. Rather than pre-blocking a scene, I examined with the actors the emotional line under the words — the subtext — and trusted their intuition and judgement over gesture, posture, pacing and movement. Together we looked intently for the dynamic that drove a scene. The characters of the play truly became their own. No other production of the play would be quite like theirs. From the didactic to the socratic, from the deductive to the intuitive, from a tabula rasa conception of how learning occurs, I was moving intuitively to a more constructive conception of learner as actor and maker of his own knowledge.

I felt particularly privileged in that I had an opportunity to work with students in a way that I felt was denied teachers in other academic disciplines. Collaborating to elucidate the mysteries of a poem, responding to the emotional and moral complexities of fiction, improvising a group scene from a dramatic text — these activities put me in touch with the most profound levels of the students’ meaning making, with the way they construct and interpret the world. And I have assumed that their constructions in turn were affected by these very activities. How can their contact with great literature, I asked myself, not help them become more sensitive, more aware, more discriminating — somehow better for the experience? Will not the dialogue between students and literature embodied in their own writing lead to an enhanced understanding of themselves to the world?

Thoughts of directing a student Lear surface — of tracing with him Lear’s spiritual pilgrimage, inviting him to draw upon his seventeen-year-old experience of pride, delusion, pain and loss. I think of asking him to reflect upon his deepest understanding of human capacities for ultimate evil and transcendent love so that he might empathize with the tormented protagonist and represent his empathy truly in gesture, movement, and voice. It is a testimony both to him and to Shakespeare that his performance demonstrated his ability to respond to my demands. Response, mutual respect, insight, personal development. Surely this was real teaching?

My students read fine literature, imaginatively engaged in fictional characters’ predicaments, discussed their responses to literary texts and the moral issues embodied in them, captured experience in language as sincerely as possible, and sought the emotional truth of a dramatic text. I have never doubted that what we were involved in was somehow transformative, was somehow what education ought to be.

Where to now? Seven hundred miles due North of Vancouver, amid the mountains of northern British Columbia is the Indian community of Hazelton, the site of the University of Victoria’s first Bachelor of Education program taught in situ. When I joined the Gitksen-
Carrier Teacher Training Project to teach a course in oral communication in the winter of 1984. 20 students were involved (15 women and 5 men). Courses were taught at the Ksan, the community and arts center at the edge of town, either by a local teacher or by a University of Victoria professor such as myself flown in for extended weekends every three or four weeks. The women were mostly married, but some were single parents; the men, generally younger, seemed less committed — anxious to return to the trap line or work in the bush or the canning factory on the coast, seeing their paid spell in the program as a stop-gap. Almost in spite of themselves, many became deeply committed and thrilled by the experience of learning and growing mastery. My own oral communication course allowed one of the students said to me, palms upward and apart in front of his body.

"Now," he his head, "I just wanted to show you we could have a nice talk. Now you'll just think like every other white man — that we're drunken Indians."

For the Indians a whole new world was opening up: their children would be taught by Native Teachers, they would grow up proud of their culture and language. Some real teaching again, I felt — the empowerment of the disadvantaged and underprivileged. But transformation through education may well involve pain and a setting apart from one’s fellows. "See, we were like this when we married," a husband of one of the students said to me, palms upward and apart in front of his body — right hand (indicating him) higher than left hand (indicating his wife). "Now," he sighed, shaking his head, "I do not understand some of her words and it is like this." The left hand (the "wife" hand) rose clearly above the other one. What accommodations must be made now?

Does it take broken glasses and bloodied lips in a beer parlor to make us aware of the impact we teachers have on students? At the end of the course, a banquet to which the Associate Dean of Education at the University of Victoria and cooperating teachers were invited was held to help celebrate the completion of the first year. The formality of the occasion impeded the natural flow of laughter and talk. Later in the evening, the Dean and I adjourned to the tavern in the basement of the Inlander — Hazelton's hotel and competing center of community life. Jostled between the billiard table and the bar, we were joined by two of my young male students, enthusiastically telling us about their program and their lives. A softening of voices and swarming behind us was insufficient to prepare us. Suddenly the two natives with us were set upon; tables were overturned and glasses fractured against faces before order was restored. Our friends had paid the price for their overwhelming ambition. The younger of the two hugged me, crying "I just wanted to show you we could have a nice talk. Now you'll just think like every other white man — that we're drunken Indians."

Why is it that rural environments have the power to shape my thoughts? Is it the stark realities of rural life? The desire for learning untainted by notions of prestige? Morden, Portage La Prairie, Powerview, Gypsumville and Dauphin were the rural sites involved in my adolescent distance education course at the University of Manitoba. Sometimes I would give my three hour weekly lesson from the control booth at the University — my students and I talking to each other across the miles on a two way telephone which, for some of them, had meant a sixty mile journey through the snow to get to the receiver, or I would travel by car or plane (one hour by six seater plane to the Ukrainian community of Dauphin) to the individual sites. Maybe ten, maybe two in an isolated school house, locked in earnest discussion of Elkind's notions of the "imaginary audience" and "the personal fable" in early adolescence or Sullivan's exploration of "chumship" in pre-adolescence. Yet, extraordinarily, it felt like real teaching. As we discussed moral reasoning development in adolescents I would call up Lawrence Kohlberg for his comments. His voice crackled on the phone but the significance of his ideas and Professor Carol Gilligan's challenging views on adolescent female development seemed every bit as real, powerful, and relevant to my students in rural Manitoba as they did to those in my seminar class a few years back at Harvard. These people of all ages and backgrounds had made a massive investment in their education, unsupported by expensive libraries or an environment of scholarship. Driving back from a class at 2:00 A.M. on a February morning across the frozen prairies from a site one hundred and thirty miles away from Winnipeg, it seemed to me there could hardly be teaching more rewarding. These students' commitment, their letting
me into their lives, their intellectual thirst — was both humbling and exhilarating. And the impact of the course on them is poignantly hinted at in a number of letters. “My work load hasn’t permitted me to enroll in further university courses,” a lady wrote to me a year after completion of the course, “but I re-read the material you so generously provided, so I won’t get too stale.”

Finally, an image of Michael, my grade eleven student, appears before me against a backdrop of Gothic facades and shabby wooden staircases in Saint John’s Britannia Street. Curly-headed, lithe, handsome, he was the son of a black woman who had died when he was ten and an illiterate and alcoholic white man chronically out of work. After his father attacked Michael — who was sleeping at the time — and broke his jaw, Michael was no longer allowed to live at home and so embarked on life in a succession of foster homes. Fiercely defensive of his feckless father, he was ever ready to leave my English class if the police reported the father had been found drunk in a back alley of the city. Off to the local employment board he would go during his school lunch break to read out for his father details of jobs he could never get or hold. “How do you do it, Michael,” I would say with awe. “How so hopeful so reluctant to condemn?” He smiled quizzically at my question as he dashed off to boxing practice, to rehearsal as one of Nicely Johnson’s cronies in Guys and Dolls, to study chemistry or to his part-time job. Ready to give affection, he was quick, too, to trace the least hint of condescension. He pondered long before he accepted the Fair Isle gloves the school secretary knitted for his chapped hands and he barked vigorously once when I rashly implied his father’s irresponsibility. We talked often and long as we planned his future. Now, armed with a Bachelor’s degree from St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick and a Master’s degree in criminology from a university in Ontario, he has returned to the streets where he grew up — to work for a pittance, with disturbed and delinquent adolescents; back to the world from which, through his credentials, he so easily could have escaped. What did Michael learn? Not nearly as much as I learned from him. He was indeed one of Robert Coles’ “impregnable children,” who mysteriously can trust, work and love. What we were involved in together was, I believe, a kind of moral education.

The worlds of Michael and the St. John’s adolescents, of the Gitkson-Carrier Indians in British Columbia, of the distance education students of rural Manitoba, have now yielded to the world of more privileged Dartmouth students. Yet, as I watch my undergraduate student Emil question a four year old girl on her understanding of gender appropriate objects in his study of the relationship between sex-role stereotypes and spatial ability, I am moved again. He kneels beside her in the dust of the day care center floor to reduce his height. “Is this used by little boys or little girls?” he asks, pointing to a picture of a broom. “Both,” she says. He smiles in approval and we adjourn to discuss results and plan strategy. That evening we stand, in prayer, before a meal he has cooked for us and his four housemates, all born-again Christians. Later, still, we talk of his plans to be a child analyst. The mutual respect, the personal sharing, the joint learning — these are the heart of the educational process and are as evident at Dartmouth College as in my less privileged Canadian settings and are what “real” teaching is all about.

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