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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Prior to their retreat in the autumn of 1990, the trustees of Radcliffe College were sent a series of questions, the answers to which we interpreted to yield a personality profile of each trustee. The sequence of the questions was scrambled, but the results were indexed on the basis of four pairs of mutually antithetical parameters. For each of these paired parameters the answers to the list of questions were evaluated on a scale ranging from minus 5 to plus 5.

One of the four pairs was Introversion/Extroversion. Here I scored right in the middle, neither particularly extroverted, nor markedly introverted. This result did not especially surprise me, but it took me back a great many years, to my enrollment as a Freshman, just after arriving in this country on my seventeenth birthday. As part of our matriculation we were required to fill out a questionnaire; little did I suspect that this would be but my first participation in that national pastime of filling out forms. This earlier questionnaire did not beat around the bush: it bluntly asked whether I considered myself an introvert or an extrovert.

I had been reared in my native Holland on the premise that one should not make oneself conspicuous, and that friendships should not be entered into lightly since they were to last not just for a lifetime but for generations to come. Introversion rather than extroversion had been the approved norm. Furthermore, I found myself somewhat overwhelmed...
by the generous ebullience with which we had been greeted here, compared to which I rated myself as an introvert. Little did I realize the trouble I was to find myself in.

I was promptly referred to the psychiatrist, who suggested that to be an introvert was unhealthy, and that we must at once get to the bottom of this. Rather than realizing that if anything I had been brought up to be a bit of a snob, he inferred that I must be suffering from a sense of inferiority, which he attributed to my foreign and presumed religious origin. Having thus become persuaded that I had many reasons to feel inferior, I fortunately decided that my principal problem was the psychiatrist, and I never returned to see him again, pursuing a lifestyle which appears to be right in the middle of the American scale of extraversion, and rather too ebullient by Dutch standards.

Age after age her tragic empires rise . . .

That cultural patterns become ingrained long before the Freshman year at college became clear to me when in the Spring of 1991 a group of sixth-graders visited me in my Design Science Studio under the auspices of the Cambridge School Volunteers, escorted by Lisa Van Vleck. There were about ten boys and six girls, who applied themselves with great enthusiasm to a number of geometrical games with the use of scissors, paper and straight edges. The boys arranged themselves on one side of the room, the girls on the other. About four of the boys attempted to dominate the activity in their sphere, competing for attention. Another four boys kept to themselves, apparently defeated by the aggressive behavior of their peers. All the girls clustered together, supporting each other.

This gender-specific behavior has, of course, been observed many times before; our faculty has been frequently alerted to it in recent years. Among college-age students it is not as raw as it was among this group of twelve-year olds.

After our session was over, I discussed this behavior with Lisa Van Vleck, who said that she already had brought it to the attention of the girls themselves.

Earth might be fair, and all men glad and wise . . .

It is as yet an open question which, if any, of the sixth-graders was having a problem: the boys or the girls. The following anecdote demonstrates that one should consider such a question from various perspectives. Some years ago I was in charge of a weekday morning service in Harvard's Memorial Church. I had chosen a hymn whose first line I have borrowed for the title of the present essay, and from which the section headers are also taken. After the service a young woman complimented me on the choice of that particular hymn, expressing her regret that nowadays it is considered taboo by some people because of the exclusive use of the word man, and the omission of woman. Another of those present, Bici Pettit, drily commented that the hymn is perfectly acceptable, for obviously women have no foolish ways to forswear!

Earth shall be fair, and all her people one . . .

Now what is the connection between these anecdotes? Well, if Bici Pettit is correct, and women have no foolish ways to forswear, then who were having problems among the sixth-graders, the girls or the boys? Did Lisa Van Vleck tell the girls that they should be more aggressive, like the boys? I do not know, but I do know that many women in a university setting act on the assumption that it is the women who have the problem, not the men, and that the women must act more like the men. Isn't that a premise based on the assumption that the dominant culture is "correct" and must be conformed to?

My experience as a Freshman illustrates the error in this assumption. In the first place, the psychiatrist did not actually determine whether I was an extrovert or an introvert; he merely accepted the perception of someone reared in a differ-
ent culture and value system. Then, although my choice was simply the one more acceptable within the value system in which I was brought up, he interpreted it as deviant within his own value system, and felt that it must be "treated."

American culture is particularly competitive: to the winner the spoils, and everyone else loses. We distort values in our excessive rewards to "the" winner. By labeling the others "losers" we fail to encourage them to go beyond that which they perceive to be their limits. We teach "gamesmanship," which should be called "winmanship," in other words, skills to eliminate equally worthy competitors, skills which are usually totally irrelevant to the task at hand. As we saw in our sixth-grade group, such competitive behavior is wasteful: it may benefit one fourth of the class, but eliminates the other three fourths.

I believe that we have matured enough to admit that there are cultural-behavioral-gender differences in our culture. The dominant minority stresses competition rather than mutual support. It will be interesting to see whether women, the majority, will ultimately adopt or challenge this dominant, competitive minority behavior.