



Must Teachers Be "Neutral"?

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"Good teaching defined in terms of concealment," asserts the author of this article, "denies one the opportunity to be both good teacher and good citizen." He suggests, as an alternative, "an open and intelligent valuing of reflective thought."

DURING the months preceding the national election this year, many teachers will want to examine campaign issues with their students. A disciplined profession will expect these teachers to be neutral and impartial in their treatment of each issue. Indoctrination in favor of any political party will be frowned upon by all professionally-minded teachers. Many teachers will also wish to exercise their political responsibilities as citizens and they will engage in various kinds of campaigning outside the classroom and on their own time.

The questions immediately arise: Can teachers keep entirely separate

their civic and their professional activity? Will not the teacher who takes part in a political campaign tend to reflect in his professional handling of political issues the bias which is central to his civic behavior? Must the teacher shirk his political duties in order to maintain his neutrality as a teacher?

If the answer to any of these questions is in the affirmative, the professionally-minded teacher is forced into the status of a second-class citizen. Moreover, political activity would be denied the knowledge and ideals of the professional teacher. Likewise, the teacher would find that his opportunity to learn practical politics had been

limited. The latter consequence would be particularly unfortunate since so many teachers lack a realistic understanding of the American political system. Their activity as a precinct captain, or as a candidate for public office, would constitute at least part of the solution to their lack of realism.

Civic versus Professional Responsibilities

The issue of civic versus professional responsibilities arises largely because of the widespread assumption that teachers ought to conceal from students the exact nature of their political convictions. Teacher neutrality has been defined in such a way as to place upon the teacher the responsibility of being restrained in his expression of personal opinion. Political activity, on the other hand, calls for some degree of public expression. Consequently, it is argued that teachers ought not to engage in political activity, since their students would soon learn where they stand. Further, it is argued that students will stop thinking as soon as they learn what the teacher thinks. Rather than think, many students will merely agree with the teacher.

The assumption that the expression of opinion by the teacher, either verbally or through political activity, is likely to prevent thought in a student will not stand up when we make any thoroughgoing analysis of the thinking process and the psychological conditions which make the process possible. Such examination would indicate that what is needed is not so much political neutrality as a definite and well-grounded commitment to thought as a method by which to reach decisions and judg-

ments. Such commitment means that the teacher is non-neutral where democracy is concerned, and that teachers are devoted to the value of differences, the opportunity of dissent, and the promise of controversy. Under this approach to learning, the existence of teacher opinion is neither denied nor concealed. Teacher opinion, like any other opinion, is treated as an object of inquiry. The tendency of some students to agree with the teacher as a matter of regular habit is taken as evidence that the teacher has failed to create conditions favorable to thought.

According to John Dewey, "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief, or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends constitutes reflective thought." Reflective thought may take place only when a belief is in doubt. Without the presence of doubt, there is no reason for a student to think. Pedagogically speaking, the teacher who is committed to reflective thought will have to do at least two things as a matter of classroom practice. First, he will try to elicit belief from his students. Second, he will try to cast doubt upon the elicited belief. The casting of doubt must take place even though the teacher shares with the students the conviction expressed by them. *The danger is not so much that teachers will express opinion but that they will fail to cast doubt upon their own opinions whenever they happen to be expressed by students.*

The fact that the views of the teacher

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happen to be concealed and unexpressed makes it easier for the teacher who wishes to do so to appear impartial as he makes partial use of his doubt-provoking techniques. The principle here involved may become more concrete to the reader when he considers the problem of the communist teacher. The communist whose communism is unknown to the student has a greater opportunity to teach his views than does the communist who openly declares the character of his faith. Unfortunately, we have tried to deal with communism by driving it underground, with the consequence that it is increasingly difficult for students to identify teachers with Marxist assumptions.

Permissiveness Must Be Created

Driving underground the opinions of the teacher, either through policies of censorship and suppression or through a self-imposed conception of neutrality, is defended with the argument that the expression of opinion by the teacher tends to destroy permissiveness. Permissiveness is defined as a situation within which students feel free to express their beliefs and attitudes. The valuing of permissiveness is well-grounded in the belief that teachers can hardly provoke thought by casting doubt on student beliefs if they are ignorant of what their students believe. The content of thought consists of ideas and data. Permissiveness makes it possible for ideas to appear. It may even make it possible for data to appear when they are needed in the testing of an idea. There is no question of the value of permissiveness. The issue is whether teachers must conceal their beliefs in order to get permissiveness.

It is freely granted by almost everyone who is concerned with this issue that permissiveness does not exist merely as a consequence of a teacher's being noncommittal. The beliefs of the student have to be elicited, which is the same as saying that permissiveness has to be created. Usually, the teacher achieves such permissiveness through the questions he asks, the assignments he makes, the materials he employs, the gestures he makes, the tolerance he displays, and even through the tone of voice that he uses. Basic to any permissiveness that he creates is a belief in the educative value of free speech. One wonders whether it would be argued by some educators that a teacher should also conceal his belief in permissiveness.

The argument against teachers' making their views known to the student can be extended logically to the proposition that students will not be able to think about the values of permissiveness if the teacher fails to conceal from the student his valuing of permissiveness. This extension leaves one with the dilemma: How can a teacher communicate to his students a valuing of permissiveness without indicating to students that he wants to hear their opinions? A commitment by the teacher to a social reconstructionist theory of learning (which includes the reflective examination of permissively discovered beliefs) becomes dogmatic and absolute in its quality when the teacher shuts off from examination and criticism the basic assumptions behind his classroom procedure.

We do know that the beliefs of the teacher are present in the groups that he teaches. These personal beliefs in-

fluence even the questions asked by the teacher. The question we face is whether there is educational merit in concealing from the learner these personal beliefs of the teacher. Certainly, the student is in a better position to question a belief when he knows what it is.

It would seem then that the critical consideration is whether the teacher's valuing of thought is greater than his valuing of a particular conclusion. A valuing of thought includes the understanding that thinking people do not reach necessarily an identical conclusion.

It may be true with some groups that it is tactically desirable at times to introduce one's opinion as if it belonged to someone other than the teacher. But when this practice becomes one of high strategy the teacher as a citizen must stay out of politics, refuse to join unions, and neglect to run for public office in order to conceal completely from all his students any inkling of where he stands. Under this policy of concealment, the slightest revelation of opinion is blown up and given undue significance by students who are trying to "figure out" their teacher, and therefore it is especially important that the teacher have a defense against student curiosity which is one hundred per cent effective.

It is not unusual to find within a classroom discussion of a problem that some students try to guess the position of the teacher. A student may express an opinion, after which the teacher casts doubt. This process continues as the students fish for an idea which the teacher will neglect to challenge. The intellectual concern of the students be-

comes the opinion of the teacher rather than the opinion which will solve the problem. This search for the teacher's word is proof that permissiveness does not exist. This lack of permissiveness exists even though the teacher is noncommittal. How much better it would be for the teacher to express an opinion which is his own and then ask for agreement. Having received agreement, he could then overwhelm the student with doubt, and then proceed to elicit a variety of alternative positions. Students could soon learn that their status in class did not depend upon a degree of agreement with the teacher but rather upon their capacity to criticize an idea irrespective of its origin. The fact that students accept a teacher's opinion unreflectively means that the teacher has failed in his purpose. One does not meet this problem by running from it. It may be tactical to run away in certain circumstances but when the tactic becomes strategy the teacher has confessed failure in his attempts to get ideas considered with evidence.

Our thinking about educational issues has been plagued by many a dualism. It is characteristic of all dualisms that one half tends to prosper at the expense of the other half. The same is the case with the dualism between the teacher as citizen and the teacher as educator. Good teaching defined in terms of concealment denies one the opportunity to be both good teacher and good citizen. The solution lies in a commitment not to concealment but to an open and intelligent valuing of reflective thought as a method by which to live democratically both as a teacher and as a citizen.

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