

# Significant Books

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**Spurs to Creative Teaching.** *Laura Zirbes.* New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1959. 354 p.

As Laura Zirbes is a most uncommon person, so her first book is a most uncommon book. It is so uncommon, and I think so good, that I find myself totally devoid of the reviewer's traditional stock of "buts, however, and if-onlys."

Its author has always been deeply concerned about the quality of teaching, especially at the elementary school level. Literally scores of her articles and hundreds of her talks constitute an almost unparalleled monument to this concern. It is with creative teaching that she is most vitally concerned. In a world and in a society where pressures toward conformity are becoming almost overwhelming; where material values override creative values; where institutions grow big, machine-like, and impersonal—the development of the counter-force of "distinctive variation" becomes not merely desirable, but imperative. And what becomes a social imperative becomes an educational imperative.

Miss Zirbes not only believes this (she has said so many times) but she also believes that too many of our schools are not fulfilling this educational obligation. Their failure prompts her question: "Have we organized and commercialized educational materials, mechanized processes, and standardized expectations to the detriment and discouragement of

creative teaching?" This is her question, and *Spurs to Creative Teaching* constitutes part of—I think a good part of—the answer to the problem it poses.

Miss Zirbes is too wise, and too humble, to think that a book can solve a problem of such complexity and magnitude. She writes, "Insight into creative teaching can't be learned from a book . . . and nothing short of insight will do if teaching is to be creative, situational, resourceful, and adaptive." But her very recognition of this fact, her understanding of the nature of insight itself, and her remarkable ability to hear the thoughts of her readers, enable her to overcome many of the limitations of a book. She does this in many ways; and it is this overcoming of the limitations, I believe, that makes *Spurs* unique and effective.

The book reveals three divisions: First, a section dealing with creativity, its nature, its implications for instruction and curriculum, and creativity in action—all illuminated by telling little vignettes of school in action. Second, a section showing how creative approaches enrich learning experiences in the several curriculum areas: social studies, language arts, reading, science, arithmetic, music, and art—again pointed up by vivid anecdotes. Finally, there is a section suggesting creative approaches with student teachers and with teachers in service. These sections are

exceedingly well done; there is a nice balance between theory and practice. The author has never been a dispenser of gimmicks, and she is careful to lay a sound theoretical groundwork upon which she develops illustrative practices.

Returning now to the heart of the matter, the author's message and method: Throughout the first section, Miss Zirbes suggests that creativity means, among other things, that people:

- are open to new ideas and possibilities
- are not rigid or set in their relations with others
- take time to gain insight into values
- demonstrate in action that they expect to learn by doing
- are open to cooperative planning, action, and evaluative discussion.

Next, she characterizes in seven curriculum areas the behaviors of teachers who are creative, and who want to develop in children this priceless quality. Among other things, such teachers encourage:

- freedom of expression and responsible self-direction
- active identification with learning situations
- cooperative planning and intrinsic value concerns
- spontaneity and voluntary commitments
- the cultivation of flexible, adaptive responses to life-related situations.

Throughout these sections, the author provides a great many lively and appropriate illustrations of creative (and uncreative!) teaching. This is her way of making principles come alive; it is not a new technique, but in her hands it is especially effective, and it gives real distinction to her book. It sets *Spurs* apart from the traditional methods book.

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Yet Miss Zirbes goes beyond simply characterizing and illustrating, so that her writing gains greater effectiveness. This "going beyond" enables her book to become an *active agent of movement* toward creativity in teaching. This it does in at least three ways.

There is first Miss Zirbes' style: informal, graphic, almost narrative. It makes for a most "untextbooky" book, one clearly written not to help people through examinations, but to help people teach creatively. It is a disarming approach to "method," calling to mind Dewey's comment that one learns best when one is least conscious of learning.

There is second the reflection of the author's ability to get inside the mind of her readers, as she so artfully gets into the minds of her audiences. This is a priceless asset in writing, for it enables her to anticipate an objection, to explain or repeat a point at just the right mo-

ment, to reassure, to plant an idea rather than entomb it, then come back later to cultivate after the reader has had time to reflect. Sometimes she does this with little observations in varied type:

*n.b.* It is, of course, possible to learn some painful things more easily if one trusts vicarious experience; for example. . . .

Sometimes she does this with big hammer-blows, when a point needs hammering:

*N.B.* This whole idea has further possibilities. . . . Creative guidance is concerned with *creative reorientation* of the *personality*, and it is *not* achieved by experiencing repression, coercive and antagonistic pressure, nor by laxity, but by gaining illuminating *self-insight* and a new *self-image*. . . .

Sometimes she anticipates the reader's impatience or frustration, and meets it with an explanation of what she is about:

At this point the creative reader . . . may be busy, or impatient, or may be so far along in his own creative thinking that anything that looks like a long process of elucidation would incline him to skip it. . . . What he skipped might have made him aware that. . . .

All of this is not just good writing; it's topflight teaching.

There is third an unusual double-feature: First, a series of "Post Scripts" for each chapter, consisting of "pertinent quotations from the author's *other* writings, and of communications designed to open up *possibilities* for thinking, planning, acting and interacting on matters under consideration," material especially useful for those in teacher education. And second, a listing at the end of each chapter of tape recordings prepared by the author for the Teaching Aids Laboratory at Ohio State University — recordings which supplement

ideas presented in this chapter. Those who have heard Miss Zirbes talk about matters creative and educational know how enlightening her spoken ideas can be.

—RICHARD L. HENDERSON, *professor of education, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.*

**Are You a Good Teacher?** *William M. Alexander.* 58 p.

**Teaching Study Habits and Skills.** *Ralph C. Preston.* 56 p. *Rinehart Education Pamphlets.* New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc. 1959.

Mr. Alexander's contribution to the series of Rinehart Education Pamphlets is designed to help teachers look at themselves—to help them find out ". . . how good they are and, further, how they can become better."

This 58-page booklet is a presentation of the author's own conclusions about what makes a good teacher. His conclusions are based upon some 25 years of teaching and working with teachers.

Approximately one-fourth of the publication is used to substantiate the need for more good teachers. Within this introductory material, Mr. Alexander does an excellent job of equating good education with good teaching. In so doing, he reminds the reader that many of the current experiments and suggestions for improvement are concerned with the relatively unimportant structural elements of a good school program rather than with quality teaching.

Mr. Alexander's analysis of the best teachers he has known results in a composite of outstanding traits he lists under the following broad categories: (a) personality traits or "personal equipment"; (b) teaching procedures, and (c) professional behavior.

With continued emphasis upon the concept that improved teaching depends primarily upon teachers' ability and willingness to look at themselves, the last chapter of the pamphlet presents a simple, step-by-step program of self-improvement. One can only wish that the author might have given more attention to the important topic of developing a readiness for improvement.

Although developed for use with teachers in service, *Are You a Good Teacher?* has much to offer those interested in preservice education. In addition, the simplicity of the presentation will make the publication extremely valuable to lay people interested in a clearer concept of what is involved in good teaching.

*Teaching Study Habits and Skills* "is concerned with the problem of how teachers can help young people from early childhood through college to develop four crucial requirements of study: (a) interest in learning; (b) self-discipline in study; (c) skill in gathering and assimilating information; (d) a good memory for mastering material studied."

Mr. Preston's belief that the individual should learn something about each of these requirements of study at each stage in his development is reflected in the format of the publication. Each of the requirements is considered at the preschool and kindergarten level, the elementary school level, and the high school and college level. However, the somewhat limited treatment given to the preschool and kindergarten level suggests that teachers working with children of this age may find the booklet helpful as an introduction.

A major portion of the publication is devoted to suggestions for developing skill in gathering information. The

author presents some simple techniques designed to help pupils observe accurately, to provide the poor reader with practice in getting information, to teach good listening habits, and to prod pupils into becoming more careful readers. This section is particularly helpful to high school teachers since it provides a series of suggestions that fit into the framework of existing practices.

In a concluding statement, the author carefully notes that he is not proposing the ". . . teaching of mere tricks of the trade. The fundamental purpose of all instruction in study techniques is to bring about in students a renewed respect for intellectual life, scholarship, and for books, and a fresh regard for the serious obligations of their role as students. Any school or college seriously devoted to teaching the attitudes, skills and habits discussed in this pamphlet can expect eventually to experience a renaissance of scholarship within its halls."

—A. J. PERRELLI, *assistant superintendent for instruction, Public Schools, Hinsdale, Illinois.*

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of building a five-year program of teacher education which fosters rather than thwarts the creative relationships between curriculum development and inservice education. This development, strengthened by the exciting attempts in higher education to develop interdisciplinary studies significant to teacher preparation, may add in the next decade a new dimension to the teacher's experience in lifelong learning.

—VICTOR B. LAWHEAD, *professor of education, Ball State Teachers College, Muncie, Indiana.*

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