

# The Importance of People

Column Editor: Prudence Bostwick

Contributor: Elizabeth Hall Brady

## Temptations of Teaching

MANY temptations beset the teacher. Who among us has not succumbed? Some pitfalls await college teachers most often, but similar perils confront any teacher. What are some of these temptations?

- The temptation to believe that they have heard what we have said
- The temptation to believe that we have said what we think we have said
- The temptation to believe that because they have enjoyed it, they have learned
- The temptation to believe that if they did not enjoy it, we have taught
- The temptation to cover the material at all costs
- The temptation to conceal our own biases and beliefs.

Students too often aid and abet us in yielding to the first two errors.

We like to believe that our students will learn and remember all that we say. Despite what we know about the selective ways in which people hear and read and experience, we cling to the myth.

When a student asks a question about a topic which we have just nobly expounded, when the examination answers reveal a failure to grasp our most important message, when students attribute to us conclusions which could never have followed from *our* tightly reasoned remarks, we grow impatient. An accusing "But I told you . . ." or "Just last week I dealt with . . ." rises and escapes. Every

such outburst will find some humble learner eager to be culpable, to admit to stupidity or inattention. The fiction is preserved that we can transmit knowledge by telling.

Students consumed with a sense of their own inadequacy encourage us still more toward the second temptation. We choose to believe that we are lucid, organized and succinct. Yet even the most conscientiously prepared instructor at times is vague, diffuse and wordy. Far be it from most students to draw attention to his inadequacies. There are teachers who exploit the tendency. One is the veteran who does not prepare carefully, since he "knows his material so well," and "too much preparation destroys his spontaneity." His disordered words come tumbling out; the students give chase to the ideas in fox and hare fashion.

Another hides the meagerness of his thought or the inadequacy of his preparation behind a barrage of obscure language, vague generalizations, and technical terms. It is for him that certain students reserve the awed comment, "Professor Grandiloquent is so far above us he just can't come down to our level. He knows so much and has such a complicated mind you can't expect him to get through to beginning students." Few statements could be better designed to rouse black anger in the heart of the instructor or graduate assistant whose lot

it is to elucidate what Professor G. did not—to do, in fact, the teaching of which the other was incapable out of simple failure to think through what he had to say and to say it in understandable language. The students collaborate in the crime.

### The Teacher Turned Actor

The next two temptations reflect, not only our confusion about the roles of pleasure and pain, but also our feeling about the virtue of difficulty. The lure to confuse enjoyment with learning is an attractive one. Who does not like to leave a class confident that everyone has enjoyed the hour? For many, the greatest satisfactions of teaching are being liked and approved by students. Each of us has justified wandering into fascinating irrelevancies, anecdotal accounts, and vivid dramatizations by the argu-

ment that students will remember what has been pleasurable. It is but one more step to the delusion that where enjoyment occurs, learning necessarily follows. On every campus there is the teacher turned actor. He plays on emotions and uses charm as a substitute for scholarship. His jokes become legend; his personal popularity soars. He entertains; the students appreciate. Who would dare suggest that active effort to learn may yield greater pleasure?

If there are those who are willing to settle for happiness and popularity, there are even more who make a fetish of discomfort. Most often they represent themselves as defenders of standards and believers in hard work. When such a teacher reduces a student to tears or to clenched fists, he is honestly amazed that his superior regard for the integrity of the material to be learned has not been appreciated. The endless work he assigns forces

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students to neglect other classes; he cites their response as proof that other instructors are soft and have no standards. He confuses making learning difficult with making it worthwhile.

Both errors reflect a failure to distinguish between the task of learning, and the feelings, purposes and problems of the learners. Huston Smith has stated the distinction well:

It would be good if we could add that education should be permeated with an accepting attitude toward students. Such acceptance has nothing to do with softness—leniency toward work carelessly done, laxity with regard to academic standards, or indulgence toward foolish ideas. Doubtless teachers should be infinitely patient in helping students bring their ideas to birth, but they should stand ever prepared to apply euthanasia to those that turn out to be monsters. Acceptance has nothing to do with indulgence; it is compatible with the most forthright criticism.<sup>1</sup>

There is always more to be taught and learned than can be. The temptation to cover the material at all costs invariably strikes the novice teacher; for some it remains a persistent devil. Queries are cut off; those fascinating excursions through which students discover personal meanings are blocked; the instructor's desire to put the flesh of his own insights on the bones of the text is throttled—all in the interest of "covering the material." Forgotten is Whitehead's terse reminder that knowledge, as bare facts, "does not keep any better than fish." The classroom becomes an arena for a race which must be lost. Even if the last page of the text is completed, the students have not been allowed to acquire the knowledge as their own. The course has been finished, and often so has any real

<sup>1</sup> Huston Smith. *The Purposes of Higher Education*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955. p. 97.

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interest on the part of the learners. As one harassed victim of this tendency raced through the final sections of a topic, he would roar at his class, "I know you won't *remember* it, but at least you'll have been *exposed*." But knowledge does not infect as readily as do viruses.

Last is the urge for the teacher to suppress his own bias. He withholds, he is detached from the student; he will not reveal his position. Does it seem strange to think of concealing bias as a temptation?

Historically the teacher has been admonished not to impose his prejudices on students. Yet concealment of the teacher's values and beliefs may work an even greater hardship. Joyce Cary describes two of his teachers, Grey in Shakespeare and Irwin in writing. For both he had great regard, but he reports:

I was perfectly aware that I had gone to school to learn, and Irwin, like Grey, had

his preferences, his own formed taste. The only difference between them as teachers was that Grey made no secret of his preferences, and Irwin sought to hide them. He succeeded too well. So, in my essays, I imitated anthology pieces.<sup>2</sup>

Learners must feel that what is being learned *matters*. A teacher's enthusiasm communicates this, but, as Cary points out, "you don't have enthusiasm without bias."<sup>3</sup>

It would be unfair to suggest that the same motivation prompts all who yield to this temptation. Not at all. Some honestly wish not to impose their prejudices on students; they want them to form their own opinions. Such instructions have not distinguished prejudice from bias. As Cary reminds us, immature students may be unable to form opinions without opportunity to know what others value. Others are committed to the virtue of "objectivity," failing to see that it is a will-o'-the-wisp. An occasional instructor keeps secret his most cherished views as a way of setting himself apart. He chooses not to engage in those exchanges with students through which values, ideas and positions are forced into the spotlight of candid re-examination. Whatever the motive, the students lose; in the last case, the instructor loses too.

The catalogue is not complete. Nor, alas, are these temptations to be put down by one strong effort. They hover about us permanently. Which lured you today?

—ELIZABETH HALL BRADY, *Associate Professor of Education, San Fernando Valley State College, Northridge, California.*

<sup>2</sup> Joyce Cary. *Art and Reality: Ways of the Creative Process*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958. p. 44-50.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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