

## Values and Student Writing

IT IS Thursday evening. John sits at his desk trying to find inspiration to tackle his weekly composition. Should he choose to write about "My Best Summer" or "The First Thanksgiving"? He finally decides on the latter although neither topic particularly interests him. Now to find a good topic sentence. Twenty minutes have passed. John stares woefully at the blank piece of paper trying to find a way to begin. In desperation, he considers starting at the end and working backwards.

It is another Thursday and another house. Jane sits at her desk ready to begin her weekly writing assignment. She tries to remember what has been on her mind during the past week. She can think of little else besides the trip she is planning to take with her parents this coming Sunday. She decides to write about this topic for her weekly assignment. She enthusiastically discusses the plans and expectations surrounding the journey. Her pen can barely keep up as her thoughts race excitedly ahead.

Both John and Jane write for tomorrow's deadline. However, there the similarity between the two assignments ends. John must select a topic from a list acceptable to the teacher. The length and style are also circumscribed by the as-

signment. Jane, on the other hand, is free to write about something that is of personal significance and importance to her and at a length and in a style of her choosing. Her weekly writing is focused exclusively on values.

A composition a week is not new or revolutionary. However, the type of writing that Jane was engaged in might well be. Let us stop here and take a more comprehensive look at Jane's assignment. Early in September, her teacher said:

"Use an index card every week to write a values card which is your ticket of admission to class on Monday morning. On this card, record something that has been on your mind during the past week. It may concern the weather, school, parents, world situation, likes, dislikes . . . *anything* at all. However for this really to be called a values card, it should have some of the following qualities:

"1. It might reflect something you are for or against—*really* for or against.

"2. It might indicate some of your aspirations or shorter range goals.

"3. It could talk about an important interest you have.

"4. It might describe an activity which

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consumes much of your time and energy.

"5. It could talk about some of your fears or worries.

"6. It could mention some of your deepest beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

"The values card may be of any length, style or form. If you wish, you may set down your thoughts in the form of a poem or limerick. Do not make anything up just to complete the assignment. If it is necessary, simply write, 'I am thoughtless.' In other words, be honest with me and with yourself. These value cards will not be graded or corrected. They will be read in strict confidence, will be kept by me for a certain period of time, and will be returned at the end of the term."

The regularity of the weekly writing tends to improve technique; while the emphasis upon values leads our students toward more persistent efforts to have something important to say. As teachers, we need to see our responsibility to foster growth, both in technique and content. Too often we ignore the fact that the best things in print—books, editorials, magazine articles, etc.—are written because of the author's often burning desire to communicate his ideas to others, to say something he keenly feels. The values card, with its freedom of topic and form, and with the elimination of grade, affirms the idea that students learn how to write when they themselves have something important to say.

Besides helping the student express himself clearly and concisely, the values card provides a creative outlet for students with a flair for words. The boy in

the following values card showed a willingness to express his feelings in a poem:

### Laughter

Laughter can be a joyous thing;  
To see a blind child laugh is a blessing;  
A deaf child who can laugh is the bravest  
of them all.

But laughter can be torture,  
To have a group laugh at you is horrible,  
To have people laugh at your ideas is even  
worse.

So who can really describe what laughter  
is?<sup>2</sup>

None of us really knows.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike the usual weekly writing, this work will have no glaring red pencil marks to discourage any similar efforts in the future or to insure the continued assembly-line production of safe, bland compositions, written with an over-anxious eye on what would impress or be most acceptable to this or that teacher.

### Uses for Values Cards

There are at least four major uses for a values card program which go beyond what we hope to achieve from teaching writing creativity and skill:

1. *Opportunity for students to solve their problems.* We have found that the values card gives pupils a chance to work through on paper some problems of deep concern to them. Many people walk through life with a burden of problems that exist only because they have not had a way of putting their problems in a form which forces awareness of them. Problems need ultimately to be confronted and analyzed if solutions for them are ever to be found. A student discussing a problem on a values card is

<sup>2</sup> The values cards quoted in this article were written by students of: Ronald Bloom, William Dell, Rhonda Stern, Phyllis Lieberman, and Sidney Simon.

<sup>1</sup> For the theoretical framework behind this approach, see: Louis E. Raths, "Sociological Knowledge and Needed Curriculum Research." *Research Frontiers in the Study of Children's Learning*. James B. Macdonald, editor. Milwaukee: School of Education, University of Wisconsin, 1960. Louis E. Raths, Merrill Harmin and Sidney B. Simon. *Clarifying Values: A Teaching Theory*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill Books, 1965 (in press).

forced to think things through as he writes it down on paper. He reads over what he has written, ponders it, maybe realizes things he never took the time to be aware of before. The therapeutic effect is similar to the one often achieved when we engage in a serious discussion or write a searching letter to a good friend. In the latter case, the act of seeking for something we want to communicate may stimulate or prompt an evaluation of our feelings, our problems, or our lives that we never otherwise would have made. Many of us have come to use writing deliberately for this purpose. More of our students need to see this alternative, too.

2. *Guidance help.* Besides providing an outlet which allows the student to deal better with his own problems, the values card enables the teacher to participate in some individual student guidance as well. If an atmosphere of trust and confidence is established, the student may reveal some pressing conflicts or confusions about his attitudes, beliefs, aspirations and feelings. The following values card, written by a high school student, exemplifies such conflicts:

Are we ourselves all of the time? How do we know ourselves?

When we are with different people we are different. We act one way when we are with our friends or our parents, and another way with teachers, strangers, boys and maybe classmates. Why don't we act the same and be ourselves with everyone? Are we just trying to impress them, or show them we are something we are not, or make them be like us?

A guidance-oriented teacher will find ways of working with such students, whose values cards are pleas for help and support. Such techniques as interviews, group discussions and role playing sessions, have proved valuable to

teachers trying to help their students with their conflicts and uncertainties.

Often the student's problem can be solved quickly and easily, as in the following values card, written by a college girl preparing to become a teacher:

Where could I get information about taking the City License Exam? I intend to graduate in January. Could you possibly assist me in finding out about double summer school sessions? If I can't go to summer school twice this summer, I won't graduate in January.

The teacher answered it with a quick note which gave the student the information she was seeking. Obviously, she would have found out what she needed to know without a values card program, but this question about her future *was* handled and it helped to establish a relationship which later in the term made her turn to her instructor with a much more serious problem. It also helped to make her own teaching sensitive to student problems later on.

Problems of a more difficult nature may not lend themselves to an easy solution. In certain instances, the teacher may feel the problem necessitates the advice of a more specialized person in the school. The following values card expresses such a situation:

What is a good home life? It certainly can't be where there is a bitter wall between father and daughter; where father and mother are constantly fighting. I'm sure it can't mean a home in which father makes rules to annoy mother, and where life is run by a set of rules a mile long; where father is abnormally strict and absurd. Then what is it? I wouldn't know, for the above is the only kind I know.

What teacher would not want to help after reading such an appeal? In this instance, however, the information revealed might be put to greater use by a school

psychologist or guidance counselor than by the teacher. If this is the judgment arrived at, the teacher can either discuss the problem with one of these persons, or arrange for the student to do so himself. A cardinal rule here is that the student's privacy is to be preserved at all costs.

In no instance would the teacher turn the student's values card over to the guidance counselor. There is a contract there between writer and teacher, and the agreement that no one else is to read these cards must be upheld. Any referrals which are to be made must be made on data other than the values card itself. No matter what steps are taken, it must be realized that not all problems or conflicts expressed in a values card may be capable of being solved. Nevertheless, the values card enables the teacher to know his students better and, in so doing, to use his knowledge, experience and human understanding in a more effective way than would otherwise be possible.

3. *Enrichment of subject matter.* A third reason why a values card program can be justified is that it can contribute to and enrich the subject matter we teach. The following values card, for example, provides a wealth of possibilities for discussion, research, writing and other activities.

There is a question that always haunts and bothers me. What is my ambition in life? What is my purpose in life? Do I just live to eat, sleep, go to school, get a job and raise a family? Or is there something else to live for? And why do I lead this type of life? Is it because everyone else does and because that is the way our society demands us to act? Or is it that I just don't know a better way of living? If the ways of our society were different, would I obey them? This question always arises in my mind and I don't know the answers. I can only guess. But my hunch is that we always

live the way our society demands. People will always go in a crowd because there aren't enough people to rebel against it. I like our society, but I just wonder what my place in it is.

The teacher could start with this values card as a basis for a unit on the areas of conflict between the individual and society. One might go on from there to a discussion of the place of the individual in American society at the present time. What demands does our society make on those living in it? In what ways are the demands injurious? In what ways helpful? To whom? How can one meet certain demands and still retain a level of individual initiative and responsibility? After this aspect of the problem is fully discussed, a comparison could be made between the individual in the U.S. and those in other countries. What does society demand of the individual African, Russian, Frenchman? Are their problems similar to those of an American? If not, why not? A study of conflicts between the individual and society in the past as well as those likely to occur in the future could also be included. Poems, plays and short stories on the problem could be read. Essays and research studies could be explored. The consistent capacity of values cards to talk about essentials, about vital personal concerns makes the subject matter taught around a values issue come vividly to life.

In addition to providing the stimulus for such a unit or project, this values card could be a starting point for a discussion of alternative and perhaps better ways of living besides just "going to school, getting a job, raising a family," as this student expressed it. A study could be made of well known people who have not followed the crowd. Examples of people the students admire and know personally could also be con-

tributed to the discussion. Through such a unit, prompted by a problem raised in a values card, the students would be presented with alternative ways of living, become acquainted with the threats to and the rewards for the individual in our society, learn about life in other societies, and find out about some important people whose qualities make them worthy of future reflection and emulation. Such a unit would be more than academically respectable because the information found would be used to answer and help solve some real and pressing problems, problems that are important to these students and need to be dealt with.

4. *Feedback on learning.* The values card program may also be useful to the teacher as feedback on some aspect of class work just completed or in progress at the present time. This might include such things as an expression of dislike of a particular topic being covered, an evaluation of a recent committee project with suggestions for future improvement, or a plea for clarification of certain material or ideas that have recently been discussed. Such comments and suggestions can be valuable to the teacher in terms of helping him provide more rewarding class opportunities as well as affording students a chance to express their criticisms openly, freely and constructively. When such a vehicle for free expression functions effectively in the classroom, misunderstandings, resentments and wrong information may be candidly discussed and dealt with before they become enlarged out of all proportion, and thus weaken an otherwise healthy learning environment. Naturally, teachers without a values card program get this feedback; however, we have found that the values card increases the possibility that this will happen.

In order for the values card ideas to function most effectively, the teacher should be aware of and try to incorporate the following techniques in his program. The first and most important point is the necessity for trust between the student and teacher. It is essential for the student to feel he can "open up" on his values cards. He must be made to realize that it is to his advantage to be honest with himself and use the values card for his real thoughts. That is why a values card that says, "I am thoughtless," must be accepted along with all the others. The teacher must emphasize that no one but himself will see these values cards and read them. Their contents should not be divulged to any other student or teacher, nor should they be referred to openly in class discussion. Only if there is mutual confidence and trust will the student discuss his most distressing worries or problems.

Because the values card affords the student absolute freedom of choice as to topic, length and style, the initial reaction on the part of many students may be negative and even downright hostile to such an assignment. When, as is the usual practice, responsibility for such decisions rests with the teacher, it is less threatening for the student than when he has to make them for himself. The teacher who is working with students unused to such freedom must take into consideration that it may be a month, two or even three before students will come to a point where they are not afraid to write about their true concerns and interests.

In the meantime the teacher can help alleviate this difficulty by reading aloud on a regular basis some values cards she has chosen. Sample values cards from previous years or those from this article should be read the first day the assignment is given to help clarify the meaning

of values cards. Examples as to what it is possible to discuss on a values card may give courage to those who are fearful of dealing with certain controversial or unusual topics. Students often need such stimulation to branch out into new areas of reflection and concern.

Those values cards that are read aloud should remain anonymous to protect the child who may be embarrassed to have others hear his private thoughts or his attempts at creative writing. The child should also have the option to indicate that he does not wish his values card to be read at all by writing on it, "Please do not read aloud." Both these points again illustrate the important idea that the overall concern of the teacher must be to do whatever is necessary to establish an atmosphere of trust and confidence on the part of the students.

If the teacher really values these cards, he will substantiate their importance by replying to *some* of them in a short note. In such notes, an idea the student expressed can be supported *or* challenged, or a time for a conference may be offered to discuss a problem that was raised. This follow-through is favorably received by most students, who appreciate knowing that their values cards are read carefully, and that the teacher has enough interest in their ideas and their problems to spend time replying to them on a personal basis.

Students have other ways to test reactions to their ideas. Their values cards can be read to one another in small groups. The same purposes can be accomplished here as when values cards are read aloud by the teacher, *i.e.*, students will be exposed to different and stimulating ideas and the interests of others. Worthwhile discussions may also result that can be real learning experiences. These small groups could also be

called upon to suggest certain problems for discussion with the class as a whole. This would enable all the students to examine together a problem raised on a values card, and to focus their thoughts on finding a possible solution. Such a discussion is usually a challenging and exciting experience.

Still another technique for acquainting students with the creativity and ideas of their fellow classmates is to ditto certain values cards, with the permission of the authors, and distribute them. In this way, the students can read, reflect on, and discuss the cards at leisure. The ditto method may be a welcome idea some weeks for the teacher who finds himself with too much to get done to spend class time reading or discussing the values cards aloud.

In addition to an occasional dittoed collection, a magazine of thought cards could be compiled at the end of the term to be kept by each student as a welcome and interesting reminder of the year spent in the class. Students often like to reread what they thought about and were concerned with at some later date. This is valuable for many persons, who are surprised to notice the clarification of their values and changes in their thinking with the passage of time.

The values cards handed in each week should be kept and filed by the teacher. Periodically, a group of values cards can be returned to the students to be used as a basis for additional composition work. For example, the students might take one or more of their cards and expand the content into a theme, story or poem; or they might compare or contrast the ideas discussed in one values card with those discussed in another. Using values cards in this way provides students additional opportunities to improve their writing creativity and skills.

Halfway through the term, or before vacations, the values cards should be returned so that the students can see from where they have come and evaluate what they have written. A useful and exacting evaluation can be made by a series of questions such as the following:

1. Write the titles (or the basic idea if you did not title yours) of the three values cards which you believe represent *you* most clearly.

2. Are there two values cards which you are not very proud of? Describe these and generalize on how you might avoid this feeling in your future values cards.

3. Which of your values cards do you think was the most beautifully written?

4. Which had the most courageous thoughts?

5. Which the most soundly reasoned thoughts? Tell us something of how you go about the writing of your values cards. How do you find your ideas? Is there a time set aside regularly? What is *your* way of writing them?

6. What effect, if any, did the teacher's notes have upon you? What effect did reading your card aloud have on you? What other devices helped you?

7. People tend either to "love" writing values cards or to dislike writing them. Can you write a justification for both points of view?

This evaluation contributes to the student's estimate of his own sense of worth as he is usually impressed by the quality of his accumulated values cards. It may also provide the spearhead for an even more effective values cards program for the remainder of the term. In addition, following up the weekly values cards with a written class evaluation helps to impress upon the students the teacher's regard for this aspect of their work.

If the reader has become curious enough to begin his own personal version of a values card program, he should remember some do's and don't's:

#### Do's

1. Do establish a consistent and persistent atmosphere of trust between you and the students.

2. Do encourage the students to open up and begin to write more deeply out of their values.

3. Do accept, without reproof, a card which says, "I am thoughtless."

4. Do expect some hostility in the beginning from some students. Do anticipate some accusations of prying, getting too personal, etc.

5. Do read some values cards aloud, anonymously, at least once a week.

6. Do, from time to time, respond to certain values cards with a personal note, or sometimes seek out the author after class.

7. Do return the values cards midway in the term (and collect them again). This allows the student to see again what he has been working on.

8. Do return the values cards at the end of the term. But ask the students to leave you one for "posterity."

#### Don't's

1. Don't divulge the contents or allow values cards to be read by any other student or teacher.

2. Don't hamper the writing or put such pressure on students that they begin to write to please you. Give no limits on subjects, no grades, no negative comments.

3. Don't give any more praise to students who write lengthy or more composition-like pieces.

4. Don't reject those students who in the beginning won't really give themselves to the values cards program.

5. Don't ever read a values card aloud upon which a student has written "Not to be read to the class."

6. Don't allow the students week after week to turn in values cards without any acknowledgment from you.

We have both found tremendous satisfaction from using values cards in our  
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third grade; its purpose is not to suggest that all learning problems may now be eliminated and that no attention to individual rates and ways of learning need be emphasized. Its purpose, as a simple alphabetic medium approximating the traditional, is to insure that the beginning stages of reading are as natural as possible, that reading can begin without frustration, that the child will learn readily, learn reading and writing easily, and that, after he has developed his decoding skills to an efficient level, his transfer to traditional print will be as simple and effective as possible. These purposes are met. As suggested by various observations on concomitant effects, these purposes are exceeded.

Shall we encourage wide use of i/t/a for beginning reading instruction? The research evidence, the observations of teachers, supervisors, and specialists and I say, "Yes!"

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#### Editorial—Shores

(Continued from page 376)

read. To have experience prerequisite to understanding is not reading. There is a real fallacy in confusing these relational factors with the reading process.

#### Functional Elements

The actual process of reading is concerned not with *relational* factors but with *functional* elements. Instead of asking what factors are related to reading ability or inability, the answer to which provides the relational factors, we now ask, "What does a reader do when he reads?" He locates information. He surveys material to see what is there. He gets main ideas. He memorizes facts. He follows directions. He skims for general impressions or for one fact. He appreciates. He criticizes. He evaluates.

This list of functional tasks, like that of relational factors, could go on and on.

The point here is not that reading theorists and researchers should abandon study of relational factors. These are extremely important in development, diagnosis and remediation. It is instead that increased attention must be given to the actual process of reading, the functional tasks, and especially that these be understood and developed beyond the primary grades when the need for them expresses the limits of reading as a social skill.

As the impact of science and technology places greater and greater demands upon our reading and thinking abilities, the need for understanding the functional reading processes increases proportionately. For what purposes must we read in mathematics, science, the social sciences? What are the basic research-study skills? Locating them is a first step toward theory and research in their development, and to understand these is to understand reading as a social skill.

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#### Values—Lieberman and Simon

(Continued from page 421)

teaching. It has made teaching for us an ever more humane act. Perhaps the reader will understand this better by reading one last values card.

I keep thinking that someday I will no longer be on this earth.

I will not be alive.

I will not exist.

My eyes and my soul will be closed forever.

Forever is a frightening word.

I don't want to live the unlive life.

I want to fly *now* while I still have the wings of life.

Only I don't know where to go.

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