

# THE STUDENT AND THE WORD

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IF IT were possible to isolate the one characteristic most lacking in all levels of the teaching profession, it is that of a deficiency in ability to laugh at ourselves. We teach *the* word as if there were but one and, if that one be not learned and learned today, disaster will surely overtake us.

The supervisor too frequently plays such a role, often unintentionally. Caught between the fires of the co-operating teacher (the one assigned full responsibility for the classes taught by the student teacher), the student teacher, and his own teaching responsibilities at the college, the supervisor tends to give direction, issue edicts, oversimplify process and perform in a way that violates all he says a teacher should be. He also violates all that has been so slowly and painstakingly learned of personality development and learning behavior.

The supervisor does not intend to do this. An examination of the student-teaching situation as it occurs in most large urban areas can make clear the pressures the supervisor faces.

## The Student Teacher

The student teacher has completed two and a half to three years of college. Two of these years have been concentrated on general education all through lecture classes. He may have observed a classroom or two. He has had two psychology courses, one an introductory course and the other an educational psychology course. Both lecture courses, naturally.

In these courses he has read and has been told that our perceptions grow out of the experiences we have had, that we play the various roles we must play in the fashion of those we have seen perform them. Stated more precisely for our purpose here: we learn how to teach from those who have taught us.

After years of listening to lectures, our student is prepared to do just exactly that: to give information and expect in return a regurgitated form of that same information. His whole education makes an absurdity of what he has been told is expected of him: that he will have an unconditional re-

gard for his students; that he will relate subject matter to other learnings and in a manner lucid to the learner; that he will allow for individual differences and self-evaluation; that he will accept and use the findings about learning process and other human behavior.

To continue the absurdity, we might look at the cooperating teacher in the secondary school with whom the student will work and from whom he will presumably learn how to apply what he has learned in the lecture rooms.

### **The Cooperating Teacher**

This teacher has had a student teacher assigned to him. This is in addition to his regular assignment: to meet every fifty minutes with another group of students of varied learning abilities and to teach a different subject matter in each of these classes. This student teacher now represents still another "class," an extra load with which the cooperating teacher feels quite unprepared to cope and no time in which to learn and no adequate compensation either for learning the job or doing it.

### **The Supervisor**

This is the college instructor who, in addition to meeting with all his assigned student teachers in a weekly seminar, is held responsible for establishing good working relationships with the cooperating teachers. He also must see to it that the student teacher is given as much teaching responsibility as is possible. Rarely does the supervisor know before classes begin what cooperating teachers he will be working with, what student teachers he will be supervising, or even what schools he will have.

When the supervisor finally gets to the schools, he rarely can meet with all the school personnel involved, let alone visit a class and sit through a lesson. What he quickly discovers is that the cooperating teacher has much to talk over with him about the strength or weaknesses of the student teacher and that the student teacher has even more to say about his own inadequacies, those of the children and the school system in general.

Left unsaid, but strongly felt, is that the student teacher may blame the supervisor and his college for the trauma of his first teaching experience: the class had rejected him. His carefully prepared lessons, his certainty that he had something of importance to give his students, that they would view him as kindly, understanding and knowledgeable had been quickly challenged. Many of the students had paid little or no attention to what he had said or asked. He had run out of material. The class had been noisy. His attempts at humor had rendered the class hysterical with laughter.

The bell had ended that nightmare. Note, however, that in one lesson the student teacher's image of himself as a decent, knowledgeable person had been shattered. His attempts to escape to the Men's Room, the Lunch Room, or the Teachers' Lounge had merely added to his feelings of imminent disaster. In those environs, the "master teachers" had vented their frustrations on the newcomer:

"Why do you want to go into teaching?"

"You can't teach these kids anything."

"Just keep them quiet and you'll be all right."

"I hear you've already learned that nothing you've learned in college is going to be of much use here."

Later that first teaching day, he had met with his cooperating teacher who had listed (with good intent) all the things he could improve upon or should have done. The prospective teacher and his red-pencilled plans departed for home angered at himself, the children, the cooperating teacher, and the whole business of school. Nietzsche once hypothesized that "Nothing on earth consumes a man more quickly than the passion of resentment." Nothing is more resented than being made to feel worthless.

Much of the preceding is the result of asking three hundred student teachers to write and talk about what they felt increased their difficulties when they began student teaching. Many of their resentments were centered upon the failure of the supervisor and the cooperating teacher to show *how* to teach under the existing circumstances.

Some of their comments follow:

"They never really listen to you."

"They tell you what to do but never show you how."

"You have to spend so much time writing plans you don't have time to think."

"They complain about the window shades, and your objectives, and your questioning, and your knowledge, and chewing gum."

"He won't let me try anything. He says what you learn in college is a waste."

"How can I teach them algebra when they can't even count?"

"The supervisor sees you for ten minutes and then gives you a complete analysis."

"How do you make a room attractive when you keep moving all the time?"

"They keep telling you to 'vary your lessons,' and they never tell you how. I've never seen different kinds of teaching. All I've ever had is lectures."

"She (cooperating teacher and/or supervisor) never says I do anything right."

"The supervisor tells you one thing and the cooperating teacher tells you another."

Clearly, the concerns of these neophytes to teaching were to be heard, to be seen as real, capable and able to learn how to teach effectively. It seemed pointless to debate the accuracy of the student-teacher evaluations. To place blame also seemed unproductive. Instead, an attempt was made to meet the expressed needs of these beginners.

What was tried and what was accepted as being "much better" by the student teachers and the cooperating teachers follows. The supervisor also

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concluded on the evaluation as "much better."

1. *Listening, hearing, building self-esteem*: The supervisor visited the school to which the student teachers were assigned. Appointments had been made with the cooperating teachers after consulting with them. New or old, the cooperating teachers were filled with talk: about their classes, about themselves ("I hate to turn over my classes to anybody."), about the lack of time and experience for training student teachers.

The supervisor listened, heard and understood. He reflected their concerns. When they began to ask questions, he was ready to discuss the specifications and limitations of his job, that of the cooperating teacher and of the student teacher.

Two or three meetings were arranged

to consult with the cooperating teacher about the placement of the student teachers. Academic strength, age, personality and experience of the student teachers were considered in deciding what classes they would teach.

Most interesting to the writer was a suggestion by the cooperating teachers that they should meet each week even for a short period of time. "We could then decide what should be our approach—plans, writing on the board, whatever the student teachers need. Then we won't have to criticize everything at once." This was done. In conferences with cooperating teachers, with supervisors, in the seminars, the stress might be, "From this lesson, what do you expect the youngsters to know above all else?" Another time, "How well did you relate the subject matter to the pupils' lives?" or "To what ex-

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tent do all your students participate?" or "How do you get your students to know that you have heard them and that you understand?", "Do your students know that they are learning? How?" etc.

This approach was particularly welcomed by the student teachers. It eliminated the feeling that "I don't do anything right." This approach substituted a search for a specific skill, a competency, or for information. It led to a pooling of know-how that could be adapted for varying situations and personalities.

In all meetings with the supervisor, the students were encouraged to talk about "their lessons." Considerable discussion was necessary before the student teacher was ready to examine his own work. The student teacher had been asked to write a sentence or two of evaluation after each lesson he taught. At the beginning, these evaluations were usually "I think it went well" or "It was okay." Gradually these evaluations came to be more specifically related to their objectives. "They were all right up to half the lesson. Then I lost them."

2. *Self-direction*: The assumption the supervisor made was that nobody wanted to do a bad job of teaching and that if the student teacher was really aware of how he functioned, he could initiate the changes necessary. A tape recorder was made available and the student teachers were taught how to use it. Then they taped occasional lessons. These were played back by the student teacher first and then together with the supervisor.

The student teacher took the initiative in a running commentary on his teaching. "I missed him there." "I certainly sound mixed up about that. No wonder the kids didn't get me." The most common comment from the student teachers who had listened to their tapes was, "I talked too much." This was said in tones of surprise. In the next lesson there was an attempt to talk less and to encourage their students to talk more.

Seminars were planned by the students. Sometimes they asked a cooperating teacher to come and illustrate how he would develop a concept, or how he would review a lesson, or teach appreciation, or prepare a test, or grade a paper.

More often, they tended to ask if they might show *how* they did something or to ask why something did not work. In such a setting criticism from each other seemed to be more acceptable and more fruitful of change.

One of the student innovations was to request to sit in on each other's classes. The result of this was to create a sort of trading post in ideas and materials. This led to evaluation of ideas and examination of purpose. From peer groups this analysis was more acceptable.

It would be difficult to use a single word to describe the climate that developed over the semester. From individuals protecting their egos, the class members became a guild of craftsmen mutually concerned in enhancing their product. The measurement of that enhancement was the growth and academic progress of their students. ❧

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