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WHAT are some of the "non-academic" learnings that can be of lifelong assistance to young people? When the experience of participation is limited or denied in academic areas, how can young people learn such skills? These two questions have been asked by educators for quite some time and for quite some time there have been no satisfactory answers.

One of the basic reasons why there are no satisfactory answers is that these questions lead to an essentialist-existentialist confrontation: a static concept of education versus a dynamic concept of education. This confrontation in relationship to the above questions will be examined in the context of high school English for students from the inner city.

The essentialist educator is concerned with content and standards, prerequisites, and sequences. He believes that there are certain values that remain constant. For example, in the English curriculum, he believes that any writing that is to be considered up to "standard" is free from fragmentary or run-on sentences and avoids the use of cliché. To his credit, he does realize that writing is a personal, creative process and he does allow the student to write about topics of interest to the student. Yet when it is time for evaluation of the writing, the pre-established criteria of what constitutes acceptable syntax, grammar, and style are violated. What the essentialist does is to try to develop new techniques and to find new experiences in his never-ending quest of traditional ends.

In contrast to the essentialist, the existentialist educator is more concerned with present and personal relevance than with compatibility with already existing values. The existentialist educator seeks to free the individual from the dominance of prepackaged knowledge and preestablished criteria for measuring the attainment of that knowledge. In short, he looks not only for new means but also for new ends. So let us see how this may apply to writing.

Most English teachers would agree that writing is a form of communication; it is an active process which allows the writer to explore and expose his thoughts for his own as well as others' scrutiny. By examining his ideas, the writer can come to know more about himself as a person; he can develop and refine his attitudes and ideas. However, many secondary English teachers would find it difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate student writing on the basis of this view devoid of the traditional criteria for acceptable mechanics, grammar, and syntax. Such teachers would feel guilty for not upholding the essentialist view of what acceptable writing is. They would feel intellectually uncomfortable if they ignored or found irrelevant the student writer's "awks," "frags," and "puncts."

Community Writing Workshops

Yet these teachers are not completely at fault; they have, after all, been trained in a basically essentialist system of education. If the theories of behavioral psychology obtain,

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these teachers are responding and reacting as they do because of the conditioning they have received through this system. So what they need is therapy, not mockery. The community creative writing workshop is an example of one kind of therapy in this regard.

The black community has begun to formulate a consciousness and pride in black awareness; there has arisen in many metropolitan areas, such as Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Indianapolis, a movement we shall describe as the Black Writers Workshops. These young black men and women are creating literature that includes poems, short stories, novels, plays, and essays. Now, the significance of this writing is that its purpose and technique are unique. These writers write from their black experiences for a black audience in a black idiom and style. Their writing is that personal, creative, and active process pointed out earlier in this essay.

These writers are seeking to explore, examine, and explain to themselves and to each other what it means to be black in white America. Their main focus is the relating of their experiences—not conventional content or rules of writing. As a result, the impact of their subject matter and language is best judged by the effect it has on them as well as the reader. In other words, the basis for evaluation, if one is performed, is the impact of the message: *what does it say?* In this manner, a piece of writing can receive proper recognition in an honest way, even though it may violate the established and accepted rules of writing.

So how does this apply to high school

students? High school students have a need to express their ideas, feelings, and attitudes. One way that this can be done is by involving them in creative writing workshop groups outside the school environment. These workshops should be run not by teachers but by local writers who have undergone and may still be undergoing the workshop process themselves. In these groups the young writers are free to create with words in any way they can. These youngsters then read and react to each other's writing by praising as well as criticizing the content. Yet, more important, these young writers are getting into the habit of putting their innermost thoughts, feelings, and attitudes into written communication; communication that they can read with deliberation.

Often the content of their writing reflects a hostility and aggressiveness toward certain segments of society. If one accepts the Aristotelian concept of the catharsis of the emotions by art, this then is a very valuable experience. Over a period of time, these youngsters begin to modify their content and one often sees a shift from hostile to meaningful creation in their themes; they begin to grope and search for a depth in the meaning of their lives; they begin to discover the weaknesses of always reacting to life in a visceral way.

In some instances, students who begin to experience the inner rewards of creative

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writing approach the conventional English classroom with a positive attitude because they now have a need to say something in writing, and they want to make their writing acceptable to a wider audience. They now have a reason to attend to the standard rules of acceptable writing.

Yet for those who do not respond this way, the experience is in no way a loss or failure. In many respects it is more successful than the academic program in the schools because these youngsters realize that writing can be a way for them to understand themselves, a way for them to articulate their ideas to others. They are not afraid to put their ideas into the written word. These skills can be of lifelong assistance to youngsters.

What Can Teachers Do?

As far as the high school English teacher is concerned, he can participate in several ways in this kind of activity. He can find the persons in the community who are conducting writers workshops and can become acquainted and familiar with these people and their work. In this way the teacher will be identifying valuable resource people who may be interested in working with teenage writers. He may then seek ways to find funds to remunerate the workshop director by appealing to the school system, to local agencies, or to community benefactors for such support. In many instances these writers need financial aid and it would be unreasonable to ask them to work without remuneration.

As a result of this kind of involvement, the teacher may gain a new perspective concerning writing; he may come to realize that most youngsters can produce writing that has meaning, spirit, and impact. He may also begin to consider the implications of this approach toward the production of writing and its evaluation in his own classroom.

Community Theater

In addition to the creative writing approach, another community activity that is related to the English curriculum is the com-

munity theater movement within the inner city. This movement has emerged for most of the same reasons that the writers workshops have developed; people need to express themselves in a creative way and thereby begin to discover who they are.

These community theaters are directed by local people; the director may be a church minister, a social worker, a factory worker, a college graduate, or a high school dropout. The actors are members of the community; most have no formal training in acting; they learn by doing.

The growth of the inner city black community theater has, for the most part, paralleled the emergence of black writers because these theaters have become the outlet for the writers' works. However, these theaters also produce popular plays as well as their own original productions.

The community theater, like the writing workshop, is conducted outside the formal school environment, usually using a church hall or community center as its physical base of operations. The director recruits and accepts anyone who wants to participate because there are numerous responsibilities connected with a play production, for example, set design, costume design, publicity, finances, stage management, prompting. As can be seen from this partial list, these are activities that require intelligence, skill, and personal responsibility. A good director demands and receives all three; he also helps develop all three by the way he operates because most directors assume the role and responsibility of teachers in the best sense of the term. This can be illustrated by describing a theater group in Indianapolis, Indiana, directed by Mose Laderson of the Hillside Cultural Center.

Mr. Laderson's center is located in the inner city; he works with both blacks and whites. He is very knowledgeable and articulate about drama. He believes that an individual can gain a feeling of importance by becoming involved in acting because this person begins to understand himself and others through the roles he plays; he begins to develop a sense of identity; he has something to "hang on to."

In relationship to the black community, plays like *Psalms of Protest*, *A Hand Is Upon the Gate*, and *Raisin in the Sun* give the people pride in the accomplishments of their race; they become familiar with and identify with authors like LeRoi Jones, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Malcolm X, and Ed Bullins.

They discover the value of reading because, if they want to pursue the thoughts and actions of these authors, they must read. They also discover that their people are capable of producing literary and dramatic art, which means they can dare to do the same; they can try to write, act, direct, or design with hope for their future.

When young people become involved in a play, they begin to discover talents they did not know they had; they learn responsibility because the success of the group depends upon their contribution or performance; they learn discipline because they must attend rehearsals and meet deadlines; they learn how to give and take criticism; they learn how to work with others.

In addition to this, the community

theater offers youngsters the opportunity to participate in aesthetic experiences which may help them develop emotionally and intellectually. This is possible because the plays produced have personal and immediate relevance to the participants.

Also, the atmosphere surrounding the production of a play is positive and supportive. There are no quizzes, exams, or themes; however, there are discussions of character interpretation and theme interpretation. There is actual involvement in the characters' behaviors and beliefs. What better way is there to help students gain the most they can from their involvement with dramatic literature? Is there any denial that all of the previously mentioned results can be of lifelong assistance to those who have been part of a community theater?

This essay began with two questions which asked how students can grow emotionally and intellectually in a "nonacademic" setting. I believe that the community writers workshop and theater are two relevant examples of how these questions can be answered. □

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