

Teachers Live with Mystery

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"Man would not be man if his dreams did not exceed his grasp."—Loren Eiseley.¹

TO TEACH is to live with mystery. As a teacher I realize that what I do not know is far greater than what I do know. And so it will always be.

I observe Harold. He is sitting on the bench near the hall door, watching a ball game. He leans over and re-ties one shoe. His friend Alan arrives, Harold jumps up, and the two boys talk animatedly before running off toward the basketball court. Are they going to join a basketball game? It turns out they are headed toward a group of girls playing dodge-ball—to harass them.

I observe Harold again on the same bench at the same recess period a day later. Alan arrives out of breath from running, half falls against Harold. Harold gets up and shoves him hard, causing him to fall. Alan hurts his knee, begins to cry, but soon goes off in another direction. Five minutes later, he is back and he and Harold go off together as though nothing had happened. My expectations of animosity or coolness between the boys turn out to have been wrong. I live with mystery.

American education, like American industry, has been obsessed with control: the need to control all the variables, complex though they are, so that a predictable human product "comes out" at the end of a period of schooling. There are many reasons for

this, among them the size and diversity of the pupil population with which we deal and the nature of the political economy which supports schools for the benefits they can produce. For example, we know that schools can teach children of diverse backgrounds to read, to deal with numbers, and to memorize accepted bodies of information in such fields as health, science, and the social sciences.

We know that kids whose original language is Spanish, for example, can learn English and an appropriate amount of information. Graduates of our high schools can then work in business or industry or go on to college or technical training so that they can serve the corporate state at a higher income level. The system, we have tended to believe, depends on control: we set out to teach relatively modest skills and sets of information to large numbers of people, and we want predictable behavior by predictable people during and after the schooling (4, 5, 6).

This goal overlooks the individual, his individuality, and his needs. In the long run, as we are learning, the system is counter-productive: substantial numbers of students, many in the primary grades, are resisting actively or passively. Such students may realize at some level of consciousness that the schools seldom allow for their own healthy evolution as individuals. They, if they are relatively passive resisters, observe the active resisters being curbed and cajoled all day long

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by teachers convinced they are "molding good citizens."

The mystery I choose to live with is much vaster and much more interesting than the limited mystery of how long it will take Harold to learn his times tables. I have faith that American students will choose to learn their times tables and many of the other limited skills we set for them. I also believe that each student has the potential for seeing himself and seeking himself in multiple ways and that I can serve him best by controlling him least (2).

This does not mean that I have no standards for behavior, that I accept or encourage bedlam. Yet in classes where children and young adults make their own rules, I see, generally, order—a different kind of order than in a conventional classroom, a much more mysterious order, but order nonetheless. For children and young adults appreciate very quickly real opportunities to seek and to do what they see as important and interesting to them. I do not have to impose rules on them; they go about their business, and few of them have time to interfere with the parallel seeking of others.

Consider subject matter for teaching. At the present accelerating rate in the production of information, there is no way that I can present students with all there is in even a limited field. There is no way that I can keep up with all the flow—even all the sources. So I live with mystery and I help students appreciate the fact that they will always live with mystery (7).

I also work at keeping up with my fields of specialization (elementary teaching, the teaching of elementary social studies and reading); the rationales, the sources and types of information, the various approaches and organizations of the material, and the condensers and summarizers (such as *Educational Leadership* and *The Reading Teacher*).

The "Dispenser of Knowledge"

Ten years ago most students in teacher education colleges were taught that the basal reader method was the best (if not the only) consistently successful method of teaching

elementary students to read. Today, far greater stress is put on varied approaches and materials: linguistic systems, a language experience approach, programmed materials, individualized reading, and on eclectic combinations of methods and materials. Mysterious, we find that new methods and combinations of methods not only "work" but are enjoyed by students.

I long ago gave up my image of the teacher as a "dispenser of knowledge," so it no longer seems crucial that I be a fount of knowledge or even that I be able to point the way to the fount. For each individual seeks his own way, each individual learns in his own private idiosyncratic manner. I observe the behavior of another and make inferences about his learning. Yet, though I study him in several ways—from video tape to test to interview—over a prolonged period of time, I still end up with mere inferences about his learning and more or less useful hypotheses about his future behavior. For example, I can encourage Ted to move on to the "next" skill in arithmetic. But I cannot know what he knows, how he sees each task ahead of him, whether he will notice relationships, and what he will do with what he sees and knows.

Hence, I frequently encounter those puzzling situations in which I say, "I know he knows that, and I've explained this relationship to him four times—why can't he see it? The one leads to the other, ipso facto, QED. . ." The point is that it is his perception, his relational thinking, not mine. I continue to learn to live with mystery.

Yet I as a teacher need some feeling of security—that I am on the right track, doing things which contribute to the evolution of individual human beings. Not much of this security is found in reliance on the old recipes or on the newly proclaimed gadgets. As Torrance and Myers say, I find my security in indications that my pupils ". . . are interested and deeply involved in learning and are excited about school." In spite of the many mysteries with which I live, I see evidence of such interest and involvement every day (8).

I am both participant and observer in the classroom. I am a force, a presence, an emotional factor in what happens and what does

not happen. There are times when my words or my facial expressions or gestures will intrude upon and inhibit potentially valuable learning. There is no way I can prevent these distractions, other than by absenting myself from the room—and even then there is the threat of my return. By maintaining a "low profile" as interferer, I can reduce the threat and hopefully not be seen as a "put-downer." By emphasizing my role as an observer, friend, companion, fellow learner, helper, and confidant, I increase the psychological comfort of students and maximize my supportive and collaborative efforts.

It has long been recognized that I as an observer inevitably intrude myself into any situation which I observe. As P. W. Bridgman says, "The brain that tries to understand is itself part of the world that it is trying to understand" (1). By observing Ted, I put myself into the situation. Ted almost always knows I am observing him, and so my observation influences to some extent his behavior. I can hope, by being "low profile" and non-pushy, to become his friend and co-learner. Yet, as Jane Goodall found out, even years after a number of chimps became acquainted with her and the fact that she never intentionally threatened them, they still interacted with her in limited and cautious ways. Students in American classrooms, because of previous experiences of being put down by teachers and other adults, take a while to become used to a teacher who treats them as valued individuals who are becoming.

When I plan for the learning of others I plan for variety, as much variety as I can imagine. I do not know what another person will learn or how he will learn it. So I look for large quantities of varied learning materials and encourage a wide variety of learning activities. I encourage pupils to bring things into the classroom. I encourage some whole-class activities, many group activities, pair partnerships, and solitary efforts.

I recognize daydreaming as a legitimate behavior of the student in the classroom, library, or study hall. For there is no way for me to know where his idle speculation may lead him. This is not showing reverence for idleness but reverence for individual integrity.

I can indeed force a student to make some show of effort at completing an assignment, but only at a cost. When he is dealing with the mysteries he sees in his own private vision, I am content to let him be. Any busy-work he does at my prodding will result in minimal learning and may well interfere with his own evolving self-esteem and his own creative reflections about life problems as he sees them. When he chooses to come to me to talk about them, then I may get some insight into him as a person, as a learner. Then again, I may not.

My task, as Charles Marcantonio has said, is to find the way to myself. For I can only start with myself as a person, a person who may become a more and more useful living resource to others. I can be, as openly as possible, the person I am becoming and thus reach out to students who will appreciate my authenticity and something of the nature of my quest for myself (3).

I live with mystery, the mystery of me and the mysteries of others around me. Those mysteries excite me and make my life worth living. Along the way I solve a few mysteries, too, but there are more that I learn to live with, not wholly satisfied but reassured by the presence of my fellow learners of all ages who also live with mystery.

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