

BRONX COMMUNITY COLLEGE FACES CHANGE

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FEW people will agree on what exactly constitutes a free university. Nevertheless, over the years many colleges have attempted to dramatize their concern for students by liberating selected groups from institutional restrictions. In a way, these colleges have been attempting to free themselves from their own worst instincts or, more precisely, from their worst practices.

Examples of such renewals are the creation of a Bensalem College of Fordham University or a Livingston College of Rutgers University. Such creations exemplify the twin, polar impulses of American higher education: (a) to respond imaginatively and dramatically to a visible institutional need, and (b) at the same time to isolate this response in order to protect the institution from the experiment's failure or its success. It is this hesitation to relinquish traditional forms plus the inability to elude the floodrush of old and new problems that make our universities today so particularly vulnerable.

Occasionally, though, a college does attempt to respond institutionally to a massive problem. I would like to comment upon an incident at one college in the labyrinthine system of the City University of New York; this incident suggests an institution's approach to becoming more responsive to the challenge of the classroom.

This past fall, 30 very different members of the faculty and administration from Bronx Community College spent six days at a workshop at the Center for Humanistic Education

outside of Albany, New York. As a group we had shared very little before the workshop, except perhaps the sense that our classrooms and our college were failing in different ways and that a workshop of the type described to us might suggest ways of improvement.

This workshop stressed the development of the communication skills needed for interpersonal relationships and generally sought to suggest ways in which our classrooms and our college might be humanized. As a result of the workshop, various task forces have emerged, some of which coincide with existing groups already functioning at the college (such as the group now working on a new governance structure). Other task forces have attempted to build upon the spirit of the workshop by beginning other working groups and programs designed to explore with our students the ways in which classroom experiences can become integral parts of individual lives.

It seems to me that our trip to Albany suggests the correct and growing concern for better understanding and use of the *process* of learning rather than for its quantification or measurement. There were several generally shared conclusions from our workshop. One of these is that while the classroom system is failing for all sorts of reasons, classrooms may fail particularly because they lack

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any specific "community" within them. Unless this kind of "community" develops, it is difficult for real learning to take place.

I suppose that most of us, prior to the workshop, would have agreed that learning means more than filling a student's head with facts. Many of us, however, seem to have been immobilized by tired assumptions about learning and needed to have these assumptions challenged in a group situation.

To Make Contact

As a teacher of literature, I have come to feel victimized by my background and by the "traditional" system. As a beginning teacher, I tended to pattern myself after the most effective models that I had encountered. Since I read my texts carefully and incorporated criticism into lectures and seminars reasonably well, sometimes my classes seemed successful; that is, the students learned well my ideas or those of the critics. Yet even if my students enjoyed a particular lecture or discussion, the sense of community was missing.

Ideas tended to collide wildly or missed in mid-air, students seldom made contact with each other or with themselves, and there was little room for them to make powerful personal contact with a book. Even for me, the emphasis was to be upon the *form* of the novel or poem, with my individual response to the work subordinate to my Jamesian preparation for a group analysis of it.

Although I sensed the problem of my classroom, my remedy was to add more and less of the same things: mini-groups within the class, a massive injection of audio-visual aids, a retreat from the physical classroom to more and more informal settings. Yet these experiments, while reinforcing and enriching my lectures, still did not challenge the inhibitions or correct the unbalanced structure already existing. I still asked my students to write in the third person, to talk about literature in terms of other literature, or the past, or even the present, but I did not invite them to share the insights or the personal reactions that they might have experi-

enced while reading the book. In the worst sense, my classroom celebrated neutrality, the student's distance from his work, and it is this neutrality or objectivity that the free school movement and the free school spirit attempt to overcome.

To Untangle Ourselves

In different ways, our college's workshop attempted to probe and relieve some of these tensions. In the supercharged political world of the City University of New York, teachers actually attempted to talk to each other about something other than collective bargaining or departmental politics. We realized that the workshop was no panacea for the problems of our society or our classrooms, but tentatively and fitfully we made our first group attempt to untangle ourselves. We tried to come to terms with each other as human beings, and this, in retrospect, seems a rather obvious prerequisite for a true learning situation.

Such attempts at movement and adjustment may seem modest to readers of *Future Shock*, or of Ivan Illich, or to veterans of free school situations. Nevertheless, to a college which has doubled in size in two years, which has been accepting students with awesome differences in background and in "ability," and to a faculty that has been conditioned to think of "bridges" to education as either the Triboro or the George Washington, this attempt at humanizing a college through a workshop experience is as appropriate as it is difficult.

In a way, we have attempted to legalize the process of change at our college; and if we are not exactly Lears divesting ourselves of our clothes on the heath, we at least have become more sympathetic to those who do or wish to. Our activities, now to some extent institutionalized at our college, do not suggest that Bronx Community College is a free university, but they do suggest that it is a college attempting to free itself, to build experimentation into its regular program; and, above all, that we are striving to come to basic terms with important questions and that these questions are human ones. □

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