

# Introduction to Teacher Education: A Perceptual Approach

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IT HAS been proposed that good teaching is an intensely personal thing, that is, the "good teacher is first and foremost a person, and this fact is the most important and determining thing about him" (Combs, 1965, p. 6). Such a notion neither denies nor denigrates methodology and skill-in-technique. It does suggest, however, that those aspects of the teaching enterprise ultimately assume a most personal quality. The good teacher has learned to use his *self*, so that effective teaching is caught up with that amalgam of potential and "person-ality" he shares in concert with no other. He is able, then, to experience his humanness, and he enters into humanizing and helping relationships (Farson, 1969).

Perceptual psychology emphasizes that the personal character of good teaching turns importantly on individual perception. Of special import, in that connection, is self-concept. Indeed, pioneering research has indicated that certain areas are particularly critical in the perceptual organization of a good teacher: (a) self, (b) people, (c) subject field, (d) methods, and (e) purpose and process of learning (Combs, 1965).

Any conception of effective teaching as a uniquely personal phenomenon necessarily has implications for the teacher-education process.

If behavior is a function of perception, it follows that teacher education must concern itself with the inner life of its students. Simple exposure to subject matter is not enough. . . . Teacher education must be deeply concerned about the developing self of the fledgling teacher (Combs, 1965, pp. 14-15).

This person-centered teacher education program exemplifies the notion that people learn by doing. Specifically, learning is viewed as the *personal discovery of meaning* involving affective structures as significantly as intellect. Perhaps the spirit and precepts of such a program are best instrumented by the provision of some form of independent study wherein ideas and experiences are proffered for purposes of stimulation and individualized response. Accordingly, students are encouraged to be responsible for their learning, and a considerable effort is directed toward the creation of an atmosphere in which personal learning can flourish. Classrooms are "seen as laboratories for trying, erring, reworking, and trying again" (Combs, 1965, p. 38), in which self-evaluation is emphasized. Throughout, there is an emphasis upon student needs and purposes

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rather than upon their products. In short, people are helped to become teachers rather than being taught about teaching (Combs, 1965).

### **The Proposed Course—An Overview**

The proposed course is conceived, and might be experienced by those enrolled, as an attempt to implement, in an introductory course, the implications for programs of teacher education of the "person-al" approach to good teaching. Essentially, the course represents opportunities for the kinds of experiences which may be appropriate to the search for idiosyncratic teaching effectiveness.

How much, as well as the nature of that which those enrolled experience, will doubtless vary for each. The determining factors, in that connection, are the singular qualities brought to the course and, quintessentially, the permutations in interaction between that potential and the stuff of the course, for

example, content, the instructor, instructional strategies. Always, students should be exhorted to define and seek out those experiences and, in general, to behave in those ways which are the most meaningful for them.

It is therefore proposed that students in the initial professional course study *independently*, using a study guide in which topics for thought and discussion as well as references to related source materials and activities are organized around five course areas corresponding to the major perceptual areas which Combs proposed as being crucial to good teaching: (a) "The Self," (b) "People and Their Behavior," (c) "The Purpose and Process of Learning," (d) "The Subject Fields," and (e) "Methods of Teaching." Included under each area are "topics chosen from traditional and perceptual psychology most likely to be helpful in the preparation of new teachers" (Combs, 1965, p. 61). Because a reproduction of the 30-page guide as it has been employed is not feasible here, a brief attempt might be made to highlight the purposes of the several course areas.

The activity in the initial area bears on considerations of selfhood in relation to human behavior. Beyond that, it is designed to help each person explore and define his own being and, in the process, those qualities which may principally determine his teaching effectiveness. Inquiry into the nature of man and human behavior constitutes the thrust of the second area. Considerable attention is directed to the dynamics involved in the attempts of people to relate, one to the other. In the next, explorations of personal teaching purpose *vis-à-vis* the learning process and a scrutiny of the process proper are undertaken.

The focus of concern is curricular in considering the subject fields. Students are not, however, instructed in the design of curriculum, but are engaged instead in a preliminary analysis of cultural trends and varying philosophical emphases. A certain stress upon curricular innovation, relevance, and humanization is intended. The purpose in the final area of the course is to galvanize the beginnings of an attempt by each person



to discover those techniques and methods which will be most suitable in terms of eventual teaching situation and purposes (Combs, 1965).

Admittedly, many of the traditional subject-matter emphases (for example, organization, finance) of the first professional course are omitted in the proposed one. Yet, it is held that the issues and activity subsumed under the areas of the proposed course might appropriately supplant the more conventional others in their appeal to the "here and now" concerns, both professional and personal, of undergraduates. Considerations of selfhood, for example, are conceivably of greater moment to the neophyte than discussions of certification or tenure. This is not to suggest that the latter have no proper place in the professional curriculum, but that from the standpoint of student needs and goals, they might be better placed in other than the introductory course. Indeed, as has been suggested to the author,<sup>1</sup> the present proposal may be viewed as effecting, in the introductory course, a new and pedagogically useful synthesis of material from the human development and educational psychology courses and the introductory history and philosophy courses in education.

Discussion, the only collective activity in which students regularly participate, albeit voluntarily, is designed to facilitate *student-student* interaction. Combs' "Learning Group" model might be employed to "help each member explore ideas and discover meanings through interaction with other people" (Combs, 1965, p. 95). Two such sessions convene each week, and the number of discussants should not exceed 25. As warranted, other communicative modes (for example, demonstration, role playing, case analysis) can be utilized during these periods.

The course should be staffed in sufficient number for faculty members to advise a reasonable number of students in connection with the independent-study format and to participate on a half-time basis in the discussion groups. It is recommended, then, that those groups regularly meet without faculty

representation. Ideally, staff members should view themselves as facilitators, resources, and helpers of those enrolled (Rogers, 1969).

There are no required textbooks in the course. Instead, a variety of reading material is placed on library reserve, annotated in the guide, and cited as being appropriate for scrutiny within a course area.

Excursions to and work in schools and community agencies, and observation at professional group meetings, should be possible as a means of providing an empirical frame for on-campus activity. Such opportunity for contact with one's prospective clientele and colleagues can create a sense of involvement and "need to know" (Combs, 1965). In all probability, such activity will constitute the first professional chance for enrollees to, in Combsian terms, "try themselves out" and "see what works" for them.

Considerable use of audio-video media is made in the course. The principal purpose is to expand significantly the measure of human resources available to students. A secondary purpose is familiarization with the media. Via audio and video tape, students gain an exposure to the thinking of field-related persons (for example, parents, administrators, board of education members) not normally accessible to them. The tapes are placed on library reserve and listed in the study guide. Motion pictures are also listed in the guide and are available for individual or group viewing at a media center or similarly centralized site.

The assumption is grudgingly made that in at least the proximate future, some system of grading will be imposed upon the first teacher-education course and must necessarily be considered in the proposed one. Consistent, however, with the personal emphasis in the proposed course, it is posited that grades might be made a more functional part of it if they reflect that which people do to realize their own needs and aims rather than the satisfaction of standards for performance imposed upon them for which they may feel no affinity. Hence, each person should decide upon the nature of that activity to be undertaken in connection with the specification of a particular grade. Every-

<sup>1</sup> Letter from D. L. Clark, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, April 20, 1970.

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thing one does in the course might be so applied. It is probable that the burden of these decisions will be taken in consultation with the study guide. An "open-ended" contract is entered into by student and staff member in which the desired grade and the activity to be undertaken for its realization are specified. If contract provisions are not satisfied at the conclusion of the course, an appropriate grade is mutually determined.

### Student Feedback on the Course

The course, essentially as proposed, has been experimentally employed for a semester with freshmen. Their evaluation was generally favorable. Notably, they characterized it as having been as much a personal experience as an intellectual one. Several students, in fact, whom the author considered among the most able in the group, reported decisions *not to teach* after assiduous self-appraisal. Others commented upon a sense of the course as interactive process. They had been able

to know the instructor as "person" and, in turn, had been similarly known by him and by other students.

The most common observations were that group discussion was consistently meaningful regardless of the degree to which it dealt with the notions referenced in the study guide, and that the variety of course activity and the practicable nature of much of it had been welcome. The experience of these students may have lent at least qualitative support to the probity of perceptual teaching theory, faithfully applied, as a context for the professional education of teachers.

### References

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