

The Importance of People

William Van Til: Some Reflections by His Last Doctoral Student

Robert C. Morris

The three years (1974-1976) during which I enjoyed the privilege of almost daily association with William Van Til enabled me to see him at his home with his wife Bee, socially with fellow professors and associates, and most importantly at work, where I was able to observe him and to learn something about how to work philosophically. I have never consciously imitated him nor pretended to be his disciple. I am, however, continually awed by his energy and brilliance. He has the unique quality of making the docile un-

easy. I shall never know whether he achieved this result by conscious art or by second nature. But I can at least report, for the benefit of those who know him less intimately, how he works and how he got us to work with him. Whether his methods were consistent with his doctrine, I leave to others to judge, though I would of course prefer to interpret any person's doctrine in terms of his or her life. In any case, I know pragmatically that Van Til got excellent results as a teacher.

Editor's note: Revived for a single issue is ASCD's perhaps most original and surely most distinctive feature heading, that of "The Importance of People." The intent of this revival is to honor, on the occasion of his retirement, one of the long-time members of the Association, William Van Til, by Robert C. Morris, his last doctoral student. Dr. Van Til's activities on behalf of the organization include such a wide range that a brief review is not possible. Suffice it to say, however, he has served through the years as president of ASCD, as a member of the Executive Council, the Board of Directors, and in many other key roles.

Yet through all the years, and in addition to all his other activities, William Van Til has kept his interest in, and has been active in, the publications work of ASCD, whether as a writer of articles, as contributor to, or as chairperson of, the yearbooks, or as a member or chairperson of the Publications Committee.

Perhaps, in this instance, and for this occasion, we recall him at his very best in his sensitive, incisive, and insightful contributions to "The Importance of People." After all, this key point is where and why many of us came into ASCD. . . . RRL

Van Til's most striking traits as a teacher are his respect for the profession of the educator and his concern with the philosophy of education. I believe Van Til is clear in his own mind that his primary labor, his professional calling, is working at philosophical and theoretical problems and then redirecting them into the more practical.

I emphasize Van Til's habit of "working at" a problem because he is convinced, I believe, that there is little use in "solving" a philosophical problem since it would not stay solved. Either it is not a genuine philosophical problem, or it continually bobs up in new forms. One of his chief delights is to be able to show that what appears to be a new problem turns out to be a fresh aspect of an old problem.

Van Til's career as a teacher covers some 40 odd years and is at times only incidental to his life-work of philosophical thinking and writing. The courses that Van Til has offered have always

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been constructed with an eye on student interests or needs. It should also be stated that his courses were attuned to inquiries with which he happened to be preoccupied—"Curriculum and Instructional Theory," "Intercultural Attitudes," "The Crucial Issues in Education," "Social Ethics," "Relevance of the Curriculum," and so on. His lectures are continuous with his study, always laboratory exercises—not exercises set up for educational purposes, but genuine hours of experimental investigation.

Van Til's usual method, if it can be called "method," is to read a few passages on a given theme from one of the best authorities on that subject and then to find difficulties of application, formal contradictions, confusions, equivocations, unwarranted assertions, prejudices. If a member of the class volunteered an interruption of this "act of thinking" on Van Til's part, it would be welcomed, whether it were a question or a criticism, and he would bestow on it all the meticulous criticism that he bestowed on the best authorities.

Occasionally, he might hesitate to comment for as much as a minute while he lit his pipe and fidgeted, then he might say, "Well, it never occurred to me just that way," and proceed to pursue hotly what seemed to be a fresh insight.

This brings me to another quality about the man that appeals to me. In or outside of his classes, he sees the strengths and weaknesses of the culture. But, unlike interested reporters or biased propagandists, Van Til never magnifies the negative at the expense of the positive. Not that he accepts all that he finds, for he constantly points to the necessity of improvement and change. On the other hand, he is impressed by many positive things—trends and achievements. He has found an educational system which, for all its shortcomings, is becoming more and more democratic, a people whose faith in education is on the increase; in short, a country striving hard for its own upbuilding. Van Til sees these and other potentialities for growth and continually voices his optimism in private and in public. His hope,

I am sure, did not spring out of flattery, but rather out of conviction.

His is a continuing quest. Even now as I write, Van Til's new book, *Secondary Education: School and Community*, is being readied for distribution. His numerous books and hundreds of articles, chapters of yearbooks, and monographs hail him as a great teacher where the democratic method of freedom of thought and discussion has prospered.

Although Van Til has published widely since his continuing column in *Educational Leadership* in the early 1950's, one particular column entitled "He Went Back" gives one a unique and interesting picture of the Van Til style and personal touch so characteristic of his writings. Of this very personal episode in his life, Van Til writes:

While cleaning the attic, he found some of his early writing in an unprepossessing Campbell Soup box. . . . Here was the unfinished novel, a mute and dusty souvenir of a dormant ambition. Here was the first draft of his first article as a professional educator. Here were his first book reviews for that most nostalgically remembered of all defunct educational magazines, the old *Social Frontier*. And here was a brief something called, "He Went Back," written more than fifteen years ago.

For a moment, he couldn't recall it all. "He Went Back." The recollection came dimly through. Himself, two years out of college, teaching school, returned to the metropolitan high school he had attended to see how it had changed. He sat back against the attic wall and read. . . .

Via the yellowing papers, he looked down the corridors of time. He saw again the unhappy adolescent lost in the flood of the big school and mindlessly memorizing the meaningless. . . .

Time and the river had slipped by since then. The human erosion of the great depression. The brutalization of fascism. The exterminations of total war. The ugly tyranny of communism. The race between education and catastrophe.

Also, the drive toward curriculum revision. The emphasis on the social scene. The Eight-Year Study. The Regents Inquiry. The heyday of the experimental laboratory schools. Teacher-pupil planning. Study of child and adolescent development. Bridges between school and community. Education for democracy as a way of life. Life adjustment programs. Public school experimentation with common learnings programs. Intercultural education. The state curriculum programs.

A ghost from the faded paper haunted him. Suppose he went back again now—back across the nation to the high school he had attended. What would he find? The same meaningless school he had experienced and revisited, a school where life begins at 4 p.m.? Or a school increasingly dealing with

social realities, meeting the needs of adolescents, and clarifying value conflicts?

What would all the educators of America collectively find if they went back today to the high schools they attended? For a brief moment, while he returned the paper to the box, the collective answer seemed to him the crucial test of the effectiveness of curriculum revision, of the usefulness of thousands of lives.

If he went back. . .

If you went back—what do you think you would find? ¹

And so it is that Van Til asks all who teach to conduct themselves in such manner that young people may learn how to think, how to think independently, and how to think about others, and with others, as life makes it necessary that thinking be joined. Thank you, Dr. Van Til, for a great contribution to the building of disciplined intelligence among human beings. [F]

¹ William Van Til. "He Went Back." From the column, "The Importance of People," *Educational Leadership*, 7(1): 420-21; March 1950.

An anthology of 24 selected writings by Dr. Van Til have been gathered by a special committee of Van Til's former doctoral students in a 153-page, soft-cover volume entitled *Van Til on Education*. Published by the Auburn University Press, the \$7.00 publication can be obtained by writing Robert C. Morris, Foundation of Education, Haley Center, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama 36838.



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