

# The Humanistic Approach to Teacher Education: A Giant Step Backwards?

Doyle Watts

education. The plan is based on five proposals that are:

1. Teacher education as a problem in becoming
2. The importance of need
3. Field experience in a person-centered program
4. New kinds of faculty for personalized teacher education
5. The need for humanistic psychology as a guide.

Combs sees teacher education as a problem in personal "becoming." Just what he means by "becoming" is never really made clear. He does mention such things as beliefs about self, about others, and the student's personal discovery of appropriate ways of implementing beliefs. But again he is exceedingly vague concerning just what beliefs about self and others would be developed. He also fails to give any indication of how those mysterious beliefs would be "appropriately implemented."

I was especially curious concerning what knowledge, skills, and abilities these novice teachers would possess once they have "become." My curiosity was not satisfied; Combs does not address that very important issue. The only reference to outcomes that I could glean from the article was a statement to the effect that students would develop a personal system of perceptions. Exactly what a "personal system of perceptions" consists of, or how it relates to effective teaching, is left to the reader's imagination.

As Combs was somewhat critical of the current instructional methods employed in teacher education programs, I was highly interested in the learning processes that he endorses. His contention that each future teacher should personally discover appropriate ways of implementing beliefs implies trial and error learning. Trial and error learning is extremely inefficient and frequently unsuccessful. To suggest that a professor should not share with his students knowledge and skills acquired through long years of study and experience is absurd. It is ridiculous

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*Teacher education has to change, but not the way Arthur Combs says it should.*

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It was with a great deal of interest, amusement, and concern that I read Arthur W. Combs' "Teacher Education: The Person in the Process," which was published in the April 1978 issue of *Educational Leadership*.<sup>1</sup> My interest was due to personal involvement in teacher education; the cause for amusement was Combs' recommendations; and I was concerned for fear that someone might take his suggestions seriously.

Combs proposes that good teaching is a function of teacher beliefs or perceptions rather than teacher acts, behaviors, or methods. I confess to being most anxious to discover how teacher beliefs could possibly result in effective teaching without acts, behavior, or methods. Unfortunately, Combs never saw fit to explain the process of teaching without doing.

He does, however, present a plan for changing, though not necessarily improving, teacher

<sup>1</sup> Arthur W. Combs. "Teacher Education: The Person in the Process." *Educational Leadership* 35(7): 558-61; April 1978.

to promote the idea that students should discover for themselves by trial and error that which is already known.

Combs also states that the techniques utilized in counseling, sensitivity training, and encounter can be readily adapted to the needs of teacher education. It is most odd that Combs would suggest therapy as a means of preparing teachers. I wonder if he would recommend the same methods for training surgeons, airline pilots, or engineers? If so, I certainly would not wish to be operated on, flown in an aircraft, or drive across a bridge designed by persons so trained. Nor would I trust the instruction of my child to a product of that program.

The second proposal is based on a need to know. There is probably general agreement among educators that the content of teacher education should be relevant, practical, and useful. Evidently, that is not what Combs means when he speaks of need. He states that "the traditional course must give way to learning experiences designed to help students confront professional problems and discover appropriate personal solutions." Again, Combs is placing his faith in trial and error learning; in the belief that confronting students with problems is all that is necessary. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Successful resolution of problems does not necessarily, or even usually, follow confrontation. Often people deal unsuccessfully again and again with the same or similar problems. Those who cope most effectively have extensive knowledge of causes and effects, of strategies to employ, and evaluations of results achieved. To expect this to occur by "appropriate personal solutions" is being totally unrealistic.

Combs' third suggestion involves the field experience component of teacher education. He advocates the total relinquishment of that process to classroom teachers. His rationale is that supervision of field experiences is too costly for the colleges. That reasoning is faulty on several points. Classroom teachers are already burdened with the duties and responsibilities to their own students. To require them to assume the additional task of field experience supervision is unreasonable. If they are to have a reduction of their usual duties, then extra public school staff will have to be employed. Consequently, an increased

financial obligation is placed on the public schools. Thus, the program would be less economical than one utilizing college staff. Separating field experience from the instructional aspect of teacher education would result in a fragmented program, instead of an integrated approach that is much more desirable. Also, the college professor should have a greater level of expertise than the classroom teacher and thus should be more competent in supervising novice teachers. The

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reduction of teacher education to an apprenticeship program would be a grave mistake. Combs' intention of transferring the responsibility of field experience from college faculty to classroom teachers is certainly a step in that direction.

Combs' fourth proposal is a recommendation for changes in faculty, or at least in the faculty's role. He maintains that experts in content areas are no longer adequate. According to Combs, the teacher is to be replaced by a "process facilitator" who resembles much more the guidance counselor than the traditional academic professor. This particular point was briefly discussed earlier. I find it peculiar that Combs wishes to counsel with future teachers instead of educate them. But, if students are expected to educate themselves by trial and error in a problem confrontation situation, then many may truly be in need of not only counselors, but psychologists and psychiatrists as well.

Combs' final proposition contends that perceptual-humanistic psychology must provide the guidelines for teacher education programs and practice. I believe that the role of humanistic psychology in education must be reduced, not enlarged. Humanistic psychology must assume a large share of the responsibility for the present decline of academic performance in the public schools. Its emphasis on process rather than outcome has encouraged the graduation of students

with limited knowledge, skills, and abilities. But aren't these ignorant students self-actualized and happy? Apparently not, as some are suing the schools because they cannot read and write, others are unemployed and unemployable due to an inferior education, and many are struggling in college courses for which they are ill-prepared. And Combs would have us extend that leadership to teacher education. That would be like placing the proverbial thieves in charge of the bank.

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Thanks, but no thanks. The program proposed by Combs would be a giant step backwards for teacher education. Instead of developing highly skilled specialists, we would have teachers prepared by a program with meager content, a confusing process, and vague objectives. Teachers prepared by such a program could hardly be expected to be competent. Teacher education should strive to diminish, not promote, incompetency.

It is evident that certain changes are long overdue in teacher education. I assert that the problems of teacher education reside in an overall laxity of admission and certification standards, in the lack of specific goals and objectives, in limited program integration and direction, in too brief a period for professional skill development, in meager provisions for continuing professional development, and in the deficiency of a procedure for program evaluation and change. The following positions involving changes in teacher education are alternatives to the notions expressed by Combs:

1. Establish more stringent and selective requirements for entrance into teacher education programs.
2. Identify the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for effective teaching, then struc-

ture the program to specifically develop those objectives.

3. Extend the length of the professional education component of teacher education to a minimum of one year.

4. Require that original and renewal teacher certification be contingent upon competency-based evaluation.

5. Provide for a structured in-service program for practicing teachers.

6. Design adequate follow-up procedures to monitor program effectiveness.

7. Develop formal program reconceptualization and change based on empirical program evaluation.

These seven points are designed to ensure the public that persons who are certified as teachers are well qualified for the extremely important task of educating our youth.

Combs does not propose to provide our students with teachers competent in knowledge, skills, and abilities. Instead, he would place in the classrooms persons who have been taught by trial and error, who have developed unspecified beliefs and unknown perceptions, and who have arrived at some undefinable state that he refers to as "become."

In summary, I submit that teacher education is a process of developing highly trained and skilled professionals; that the procedure should be well planned and designed, with specific outcomes produced. It is evident that Combs' plan would not only fail to attain any of these objectives; but, in fact, worsen the present condition of teacher education. While Combs' suggestions make amusing reading, they really cannot, in my opinion, be taken seriously. <sup>FL</sup>



Doyle Watts is Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology, Northwestern Oklahoma State University, Alva, Oklahoma.

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