

Artistry in Teaching

Staff
development for
artistic teaching
involves no
simple formula
but
encouragement
of individuality
and spontaneity.

LOUIS RUBIN

Why is it that two classrooms—in which teachers use essentially the same instructional techniques and materials—are nonetheless strikingly different? What accounts for the fact that some classes are exciting and others are dreary? Why do students respond to one teacher with delight and to another with disdain, despair, or dread?

The difference lies in the intangibles of artistry. These intangibles transcend charisma, although gifted teachers are often blessed with charismatic qualities. They go beyond style because great teachers neither function in the same way nor embrace similar beliefs about teaching. They have little connection with high levels of intelligence because the brightest teacher is not necessarily the best teacher. Although they are committed, dedication seems an essential but incomplete condition for artistry: zealous and highly devoted teachers sometimes get meager results. Nor is artistry dependent on humanistic impulse and personal warmth. Great teachers, upon occasion, are relatively authoritarian in their approach. The qualities that undergird teaching virtuosity are intangible precisely because they are imprecise. Yet, they exist.

An interesting question therefore arises: although the characteristics of artistic teaching are not easily dissected,

can they nevertheless be cultivated? Can an intuitive "feel" for what is right and wrong in teaching be developed among practitioners? Parallels exist in other forms of human endeavor. Great cooks, for example, "season to taste," with finely tempered palates acquired through years of experience. Similarly, we speak of the developed "nose" of a wine connoisseur, the "ear" of a fine musician, the "eye" of a talented graphic artist, and the "hand" of a great sculptor. Is it possible for teachers to master the delicate nuances of their craft more effectively?

This question led to a series of informal experiments, carried out over the course of five years, while I was teaching at the University of Illinois and Stanford University. The purpose was to determine whether, through self-training, the artistry of teachers could be heightened. Temporarily putting aside method and content, could teachers find ways to make their classrooms more vital, exciting, and appealing?

Children, after all, need not hate school. Boredom is not essential to learning, disinterest is not inevitable, and teachers can give even the duller of subjects an element of intrigue. To be sure, schooling necessitates hard work but even strenuous effort can be satisfying.

The project, in essence, consisted of an effort to enhance teaching virtuosity through the creation of classroom procedures that increased motivation. In short, we wished to determine whether teachers—through the conscious use of their own inventive powers—could learn to exploit elements in a lesson and to devise instructional techniques commensurate with their values—all to make learning more interesting for their students. There were also several other questions. First, since master practitioners vary in their methods, could teachers fashion a pedagogical approach to take full advantage of personal strengths? Second, could the elusive qualities inherent in artistry be cultivated? And third, inasmuch as teaching is partly a performing art; could some of the motivational principles used in the theatre be incorporated in teaching?

Conceivably, a more "dramatic" classroom might enhance student commitment, thus increasing teachers' work satisfaction and counteracting "burn-out." Heartened by more enthusiastic students, moreover, teachers might develop a sharper intuitive sense about ways to make learning more intriguing

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New! DEVELOPING AND ADMINISTERING EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS by Victor S. Lombardo and Edith Foran Lombardo. This practical preservice/inservice textbook discusses all essential aspects of training early childhood teachers and administrators of children from infancy through six years. Chapters cover regulatory agency requirements; developing indoor and playground facilities; the recruitment, selection, and training of early childhood personnel; designing programs for children; and related topics. Feb. '83, about \$23.50

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and a keener perception of their students' individual makeup. For it is only when a teacher accurately deciphers a student's mind that the best teaching is possible. Increased artistry might also engender greater professional ego and a desire to excel.

The procedures were relatively simple and unpretentious. First, a number of factors associated with skillful teaching were identified. Then, to give the project structure, four concepts derived from the theatre became the basis for inventing motivational devices: (1) dramatic episodes, (2) acting in teaching, (3) classroom atmosphere, and (4) instructional staging.

Dramatic episodes—brief vignettes to illustrate the focal point of a lesson—were aimed at capturing learner attention. For example, this anecdote was used to provoke learner interest in machines: Stuck on a lonely road with a flat tire and no jack, car passengers pushed the car to a nearby barn, fastened a pulley to the undercarriage, and hoisted the car in order to change the tire. "Lures" of this sort, used at the beginning of a unit, serve as motivational prods, urging students to become involved.

"Acting in teaching" maneuvers sought to extend teacher charisma and "presence." Many of the 400 teachers who participated took an inservice course in acting. Drama instructors taught body movement, voice projection, nonverbal communication, role-playing, and so on. Though less than universally successful, results suggested that some acting ability is an asset in teaching, particularly in primary grades, and that teachers can often use stage techniques to bait and sustain student involvement.

Exercises dealing with *classroom atmosphere* or mood were used to enlarge students' sense of satisfaction and well-being. Once teachers recognized that they could manipulate the ambience of the learning environment and saw virtue in such manipulation, they learned to use humor, competition, and occasional moments of fun and whimsy to enhance pupil contentment and pleasure. As adeptness increased, they developed individual criteria for determin-

ing when intervention was appropriate and then "shifted gears" (changed activities) or "injected stimuli" (made calculated use of a contest or some other impetus) to reinvigorate involvement.

Staging, the fourth of the concepts borrowed from the theatre, involved using novel and imaginative devices to direct learning activity. Staging has to do with process—the various techniques teachers use to accomplish their purposes. If the objective is to clarify the principle of friction, a limitless variety of tactics can be deployed. Students can read a text, listen to a lecture, observe a demonstration, test a hypothesis, watch a film, work with a computer, and so on. Similarly, to assess student understanding, a teacher can assign reports, test factual knowledge, ask students to describe everyday examples of friction, or have the class find out whether powder or flour is more effective in reducing friction between two pieces of wood. Staging, in sum, is that aspect of artistry in which gifted teachers reduce student apathy through imaginative and absorbing assignments.

Great pains were taken, throughout the experiment, to emphasize that the goal was not entertainment but better learning. Theatrics were to serve as a means of stimulation. When a teacher does no more than amuse, instruction is diluted and the classroom becomes little more than a sideshow. The recommended techniques were intended to increase involvement and, as a consequence, cognitive growth.

Research on teaching and learning was neither ignored nor used as a model. Rather, important findings were communicated in periodic handouts called "Tips to Teachers." Data were gathered through frequent surveys, teacher interviews, classroom observations, and conferences with building administrators. In the project's initial phase, teachers worked toward greater artistry in whatever way they wished without specific training. Then, a variation of critical incident analysis technique—wherein the behavior of high-achieving and low-achieving teachers is contrasted—was used to identify specific attributes and skills related to teaching artistry.

The project's second phase involved intensive work with 20 faculties. Results of the critical incident analyses, coupled with insights gained in the preliminary period, became the basis for self-directed professional growth exercises carried on in conjunction with daily teaching. These exercises concentrated on qualities that the experimental data indicated were closely associated with teaching artistry: inventiveness, spontaneity, perceptivity, persistence, and intuitive judgment.

Broken down into parts, artistry involves attitudes, intentions, knowledge, and discernment. These, moreover, must blend into an integral force: great skill wasted on trivial objectives, virtuous intentions undertaken unimaginatively, or clever tactics executed poorly, all diminish outcome. Applied to teaching, artistry involves (1) the choice of educational aims that have high worth, (2) the use of ingenious ways to achieve these aims, and (3) the pursuit of their achievement with great skill and dexterity. The cultivation of excellence requires that teachers develop shrewd judgment regarding educational goals, a capacity for inventiveness in attacking these goals, and a corresponding repertoire of technical skills.

These, moreover, must be organized into an approach that fits the classroom setting, the nature of the students, and the demands of reality. It would be senseless to choose objectives that run counter to public desire, to devise teaching maneuvers unsuited to the learners, or to use instructional strategies incongruent with school policy.

The best of teaching makes use of proven methods, but it is pliable rather than rigid. Specified ends are dealt with systematically, but there is also room for adapting to unexpected opportunity. Artistic teachers excel at improvisation. Having learned to invent when necessary, they can use inspiration as the need occurs.

The virtues of spontaneity and invention appear to have become a lost cause in teacher education. Although understandable in view of our efforts to devise more precise instruction, it is nevertheless regrettable. Inspired teaching can-

Photo: Douglas Vitaris



not be prefabricated. This is not to say, obviously, that research on pedagogy should cease, or that teachers should not learn techniques that have been found effective. There are, however, subtleties in teaching that cannot be prepared for in advance. A major dimension of artistry involves the ability to take skillful advantage of situations and to do whatever is most appropriate. Creative teachers are, of course, organized in one fashion or another, but they are able to temper a plan, precipitate serendipity, or exploit chance circumstances.

The teachers who eventually attained the highest level of artistry exhibited four primary attributes: first, they made many teaching decisions intuitively; second, they had a strong grasp of their subjects as well as a perceptive understanding of their students; third, they were confident of their competence; and fourth, they were exceedingly imaginative.

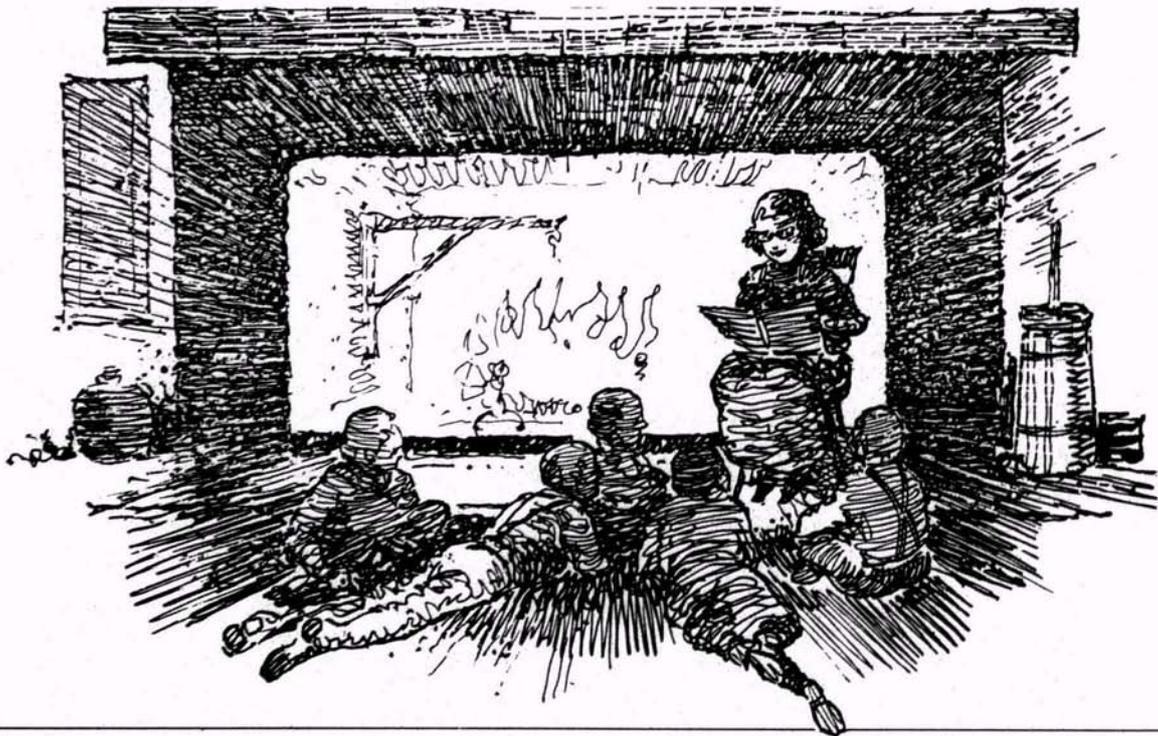
While space is too limited to present

all of the various outcomes, three particular conclusions are worth noting. They concern stochastic pedagogy, collateral teaching, and pedagogical intelligence. Teaching, like many other creative endeavors, often proceeds through guesswork. The painter must somehow divine whether further brush strokes will weaken rather than strengthen a painting, just as a chef must speculate whether or not a sauce has reached its ultimate perfection. A physician, forced to choose between two drugs—both having negative side effects—must sometimes gamble on the best choice. If, then, a degree of guessing is inevitable in teaching, it seems wise to develop capabilities that sharpen unpremeditated decision making. *Stochastic pedagogy* refers to instructional choices that must be made rapidly, on the basis of hunch rather than careful deliberation.

Similarly, *collateral teaching* is also germane. A conventional teacher plods through designated subject matter with

little regard for other possibilities inherent in the learning milieu. Artist teachers, on the other hand, often pursue multiple goals. Supervising a seat assignment involving graphs, an expert practitioner may warn about the pitfalls of haste, review a formula studied several weeks earlier, and explain—because of some implicit connection—the issues surrounding nuclear energy. Teachers who engage in collateral teaching are sensitive to the vast potential of the classroom and able to work toward multilateral aims. They are fond of complexity, or—put another way—are impatient with simplicity. They like, in short, to accomplish a number of purposes at the same time.

Collateral teaching stems from a sense of urgency—from what might be called “instructional greed”—an avaricious desire to teach as much as possible. The Promethean ambitions of artist teachers are often laced with a bit of ego and competitiveness. Mainly, however,



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they are the result of dedication. The finest teachers are compelled to use time expediently. Because they have many pedagogical fish to fry, collateral teaching is, for them, indispensable; without it, they would be reduced to a pedestrian pace and cover but half the ground possible.

The concept of *pedagogical intelligence*—as opposed to craft rules—has not been adequately advertised. In a classroom problems frequently arise for which there are no routine answers. Faced with these situations, artists resist concessions to mediocrity and seek imaginative solutions. In so doing, they draw upon their pedagogical intelligence—their accumulation of experience, insight, and professional cunning. They attempt to devise, out of the welter of their consciousness, some maneuver which will work. Describing this process is worrisome because the deeper intricacies of the mind are easily misunderstood. What they do, seemingly, is pose a clear problem for themselves. Once the specific dilemma is fixed in their consciousness, they consider one possibility after another until a solution is found.

What, then, can be said about the role supervisors play in facilitating artistry, and the part teachers themselves must take in extending their own virtuosity? First, it seems reasonably clear that artistry cannot be developed by formula. Artistic performance is the personal accomplishment of an artist, evolving from an aggregate of capabilities that, together, give the performance distinction. To build on Eisner's earlier comparison with music, a superb rendition stems more from an artist's interpretation than technical mastery. All concert pianists, for example, have impressive techniques, a variety of tonal qualities, fine phrasing, and a capacity for correct execution. What makes one performance greater than another, however, is the musician's ability to give the composer's work new meaning.

Glenn Gould, whose premature death a few months ago constituted an irreparable loss to the music world, was an impeccable craftsman. His Bach recordings, nevertheless, were matchless

because of his extraordinary vision and his ability to produce an “Appassionata” Sonata that, in its dark lines, was like no other.

As every record collector will testify, a worn-out Chicago Symphony recording of the Bartok “Concerto” cannot be replaced with a new one by the New York Philharmonic, no matter how good, because it is the particular interpretation that charms and delights us. The same is true in teaching: a masterly lesson may be attributable to the teacher's lucid explanation, sensitive pacing, or adeptness in sustaining learner attention.

Thus, administrators must begin by cultivating a passion for excellence. Great teaching demands not only hard effort and dedication, but also a profound belief in the importance of learning. The staff development activities deepen teachers' awareness of, and capacity for, the classroom behaviors from which artistry is fashioned: accurate perception of instructional phenomena, intuitive decision making, spontaneous adjustments in procedure, and the invention of tactics to fit special needs. Teachers should, in addition, be encouraged to nurture their own natural style and to attack tasks in whatever ways they find most effective. The paths to artistry are many.

Professional improvement efforts must deal, as well, with commitment and zeal. Artist teachers work harder, but they also derive greater satisfaction from their labor. They not only take pride in their competence—their ability to teach with consummate skill—but they also recognize that teaching is a creative enterprise. Often, this is best accomplished by giving teachers an opportunity to watch artist practitioners work with children in order to enlarge their conception of teaching's potential.

Beyond these things, the profession must do all it can to rekindle idealism and restore the glory of the mission. The times have taken a fearsome toll on educators and many are on the raw edge of despair. Disillusioned and embittered, they no longer care. There was a day—a day that must return—when individuals with great gifts thought the teaching of children a worthy lifetime endeavor. It still is. □

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