

Letters

Support for Tutoring

I was glad that "Making Peer Tutoring Work" by Joseph and Linda Jenkins (March 1987) stressed the benefit of a tutoring program to the tutors, not just the "learners." From my own experience in organizing a tutoring program at St. Columba School in St. Paul, I can attest to the improved self-esteem of both the tutors and those being tutored. The improvement seems most noticeable in those tutors who seem to have low self-esteem, and who do not receive much personal satisfaction from school. By involving these students in situations in which they have the knowledge needed to help others, their own chance of personal reward is increased.

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Let's Not Teach What We Can't Question

The issue on "Religion in the Public Schools" (May 1987) was very provocative. We should provide "religious literacy," but it should be founded upon an understanding of the *nature* of religion.

Somewhere in the course of my liberal arts education I was led to believe that a *religion* is a logical structure based upon one or more unprovable assumptions which the believer refuses to question. *Science*, by contrast, is a logical structure based upon some unprovable assumptions which scientists are happy to question, if they can figure out a way to do so. However, when you question the scientist's assumptions, he or she will tell you that you are now talking not science but philosophy. Some would define *philosophy* as a logical structure based upon no unprovable assumption except that logic works; that is, leads to "truth." Even "Cogito ergo sum" assumes that logic works. "If not, what's left?" would be the defense, I suppose.

But the Greek philosophers long ago pointed out that logic sometimes

doesn't work. If a rabbit chases a turtle, the rabbit must get to the point where the turtle was a moment ago before catching up with where the turtle is now. And that could go on *ad infinitum*, and the rabbit could never catch the turtle. So, we must conclude (admittedly, using logic) that logic is just a limited power which each of us has been given, to one degree or another, and which is almost powerful enough to get us around.

The tremendous irony in the debate over religion in the public schools is that teachers of science at every level present it as a logical structure, but they certainly don't broach any questioning of the underlying assumptions. They, in effect, present science as a religion! So I find myself in the right-wingers' camp, almost. What keeps me out is, I guess, the same thought that prompted the first amendment: I don't think we should teach anything we cannot question. Let the families and the churches help kids decide which underlying assumptions they should believe without question. Let the public schools teach kids the nature of the various logical structures with which they will deal in life—science, religion, and philosophy.

All very neat. But wait, there is one flaw. Democracy, which is a logical structure, has one unprovable assumption which we refuse to question. As Jefferson and Lincoln have both pointed out, we assume that all persons are created equal—before the law. That makes democracy a religion, by my own definition of "religion." And it is a religion to which I fervently adhere. So, I guess, my position becomes: "We should teach religious literacy *and* promote the belief that all people are created equal.

Part of "religious literacy" should be the understanding that science deals with only a limited sector of the questions of this world. It can't handle "should's." It can't exercise taste or judgment. And even the "scientific facts" of today will very likely be false in a few years. When scientists find a new, more powerful assumption, they

throw out the old one.

So, in short, if someone else's opinion is different from mine, I should be very hesitant to call that person wrong, much less crazy. In this country, the only "should" or "must" is that everyone is born equal in rights and duties, and they shouldn't (sic!) be allowed to forget it!

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Gibboney Right on Target

I was astonished at both the number and the vehemence of the letters attacking Richard Gibboney's "A Critique of Madeline Hunter's Teaching Model from Dewey's Perspective" (February 1987). The article *was* a bit flippant, but unlike many educational pieces, it was readable and essentially well reasoned. Yet the letters were extraordinarily defensive, bordering on dogmatic.

Surely Gibboney hit a nerve, and I'm glad he did. Many language arts educators share his concern that applications of the Hunter model tend to focus on mere information, in effect discouraging elaborated responses, subtle exploration of ideas, divergent thinking, and small-group discussion. Gibboney's concern with the Hunter advocates' treatment of intellectual processes in the classroom is right on target.

I got the clear impression that many people simply don't want to hear such ideas because they have invested considerable professional energy in Hunter-based training programs or similar ones that identify simplistic test results with a high quality of teaching and learning. Gibboney raised valid questions, and his critics, using phrases like "blindly hostile attack," "academic mugging," and "bombastic," revealed themselves as nervous and contentious.

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