

Does the "Art of Teaching" Have a Future?

We need to broaden our image of professionalism to include the artistic dimensions teachers consider central to their work.

Penelope Harper quickly takes roll, steps out from behind her desk, and glances around the classroom. Her eyes meet those of her students. Standing with her back to the chalkboard, she clasps her hands close in front of her, a ballpoint pen intertwined between her fingers. She holds her arms close to her sides and shifts her weight onto the heels of her shoes. This posture signals the beginning of class.

The students quiet down. Harper shakes back her dark hair and then addresses the class: "OK, today we need to discuss chapter two. Who would like to share something from your reading notes?" Silence. Harper breathes out, assuming a more casual and relaxed attitude. She is smiling softly now, confident that her students have read the assignment and that the silent classroom alone will motivate someone to risk putting forth an idea. Someone does. Harper listens intently and nods her head. "Good," she replies. "I really hadn't thought of it that way, but it tells us something, doesn't it? What's the author getting at here?" Harper steps forward, closer to her students, as their discussion begins to unfold.

Artistry in Professional Life

Penelope Harper (the name is a pseudonym) is good at what she does. She's a professional. But in Harper's line of work, what exactly does it mean to be a professional? Does it mean

simply possessing a body of expert knowledge and a repertoire of technical skills? Climbing a career ladder toward greater autonomy and increased occupational rewards? Or, for classroom teachers, does professionalism mean something more?

These questions were the focus of a qualitative study I conducted on the nature of professional life in schools (Flinders 1987). Penelope Harper was

Effective communication begins with the processes of learning to see and to hear: the art of perception.

one of six high school English teachers I observed and interviewed as part of this study. My purpose was to identify what Harper and her colleagues regard as the salient concerns of their day-to-day work experience. I hoped to view professional life through the eyes of classroom teachers.

I began my research with an understanding of professional life strongly influenced by the "new reform" (Shulman 1987). Two prominent examples of this reform are the reports by the Carnegie Task Force (1986) and the Holmes Group (1986). These reports share a common theme: the need to increase the professional status of teaching. In particular, they call for strengthening the career advancement opportunities, the subject-matter knowledge, and the technical expertise of all classroom teachers.

This focus on career development and expert knowledge reflects a widely shared and commonsense image of professionalism (Schon 1983). However, in listening to teachers talk about their work and in observing their teaching day after day, I soon realized that this image did not match their daily routines and their con-

cerns. This image of professionalism failed to capture the artistry that these teachers often spoke of and demonstrated as central to their work.

Perhaps I can clarify this point by referring to my description of Penelope Harper. Consider, for example, her ability to signal the beginning of class through body language or her use of silence to motivate student participation. These skills reveal something of the grace, subtlety, and drama of Harper's day-to-day teaching. Granted, these deft moves cannot be evaluated solely by conventional testing procedures or through the use of systematic rating scales. Yet they are no less important than Harper's technical expertise or subject-matter knowledge. As my study progressed, the challenge became to understand this other side of teaching—the artistic side.

The Arts of Teaching

Elliot Eisner (1983) has examined at a theoretical level various ways in which teaching can be regarded as art and craft. He calls attention, for example, to the dynamic and emergent qualities of classroom life, as well as to the intricate skill and grace that can characterize the teacher's classroom performance. In this context, Eisner uses the term *art* in its broad sense to signify engaging, complex, and expressive human activity. It is this sense that allows us to speak of a beautiful lesson or of a well-orchestrated class discussion.

If we want to observe artistry in teaching, where might we look in order to find it? My research suggests several possible locations. The first I have already touched on in my brief description of Harper's work: the art of communication.

Communication. On a day-to-day basis, classroom teachers rely heavily on interpersonal forms of communication. Philip Jackson's (1965) early research, for example, suggests that teachers engage in as many as a thousand interpersonal interactions each day. This is an impressive number, particularly if we consider the intricate nature of even the most routine instances of face-to-face communication.

The teachers I observed displayed various strategies for negotiating a cooperative relationship with their students, including using humor and providing opportunities for individual recognition.

Such communication, as Harper's teaching reveals, goes far beyond the spoken and written word—it also encompasses the use of space (what sociolinguists call *proxemics*), body language, and paralinguistics (voice tone and rhythm). One teacher I observed, for example, consistently demonstrated uncanny responsiveness toward her students. When a student asked a question or made a comment, that student could feel the teacher's undivided attention. In talking with students, the teacher would face them directly, lean or step in their direction, and maintain eye contact. At appropriate moments she would raise her eyebrows, nod her head, smile, and bring the index finger of her right hand up to her lips in a gesture of serious concentration. All of these nonverbal cues were coordinated to signal a coherent message: *I care about what you have to say.* This unspoken message was often as important to the students as the substantive meaning of her verbal responses.

Nonverbal cues serve primarily as a form of metalanguage (Tannen 1986). That is, they help teachers establish a context for communication. Consider yet another, somewhat different exam-

ple. During a literature class, one teacher I observed lighted a kerosene lamp, asked his students to sit in a circle, turned on a recording of the sound effects of a storm, and read passages from Dickens' *Bleak House*, just as a Victorian father might have read the novel to his family. This teacher's well-calculated nonverbal cues provided a context for his students to gain insight into the novel that could not be "explained to them" using words alone. Creating a setting—this too is part of communication.

Perception. It would be difficult to imagine good teachers who could not communicate well with their students. Yet effective communication does not begin with formulating a message or selecting a medium, but rather with the processes of learning to see and to hear. This notion suggests another, perhaps more fundamental art relevant to classroom teaching: the art of perception.

The teachers in my study often alluded to this art in describing their work. During an interview, for example, one teacher casually mentioned that she adapts her daily lesson plans depending on "how the group comes in at the beginning of the period." Such a comment underscores her ability to read those subtle cues in student behavior that signal the changing mood and tone of a class. Another teacher, when I asked how he evaluates his work, replied: "The real test in teaching is how the kids feel about you, and it's the vibrations that you pick up from them that tell you the most." Again, this comment suggests that perceptiveness—the ability to pick up on student attitudes, motives, beliefs, and so forth—lies at the heart of this teacher's professional expertise.

The type of perceptiveness and sensitivity to which these examples refer is a largely tacit dimension of social life. It depends on the ability to make complex and fine-grained distinctions between, for example, a wink and a blink, or between a sigh of relief and a sigh of frustration. All of us learn to make such discernments, at varying levels of sophistication, through social interaction. The point, however, is that this learning reflects an intuitive re-

ceptivity that Noddings (1984) has identified as critical to sound pedagogy. At a practical level, learning to operate in a receptive mode is basic to getting to know the students, and I was not surprised to find that all of the teachers in my study mentioned this process as central to their work.

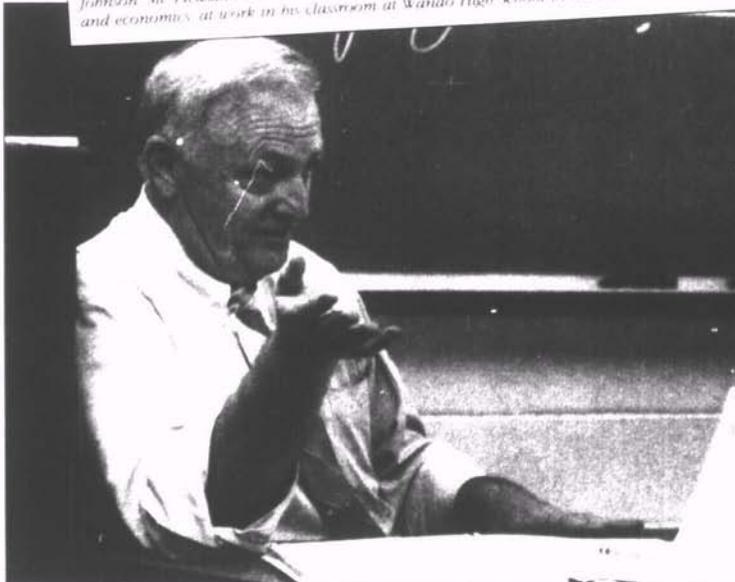
Cooperation. Knowledge of students, of "what they are like as people," as one teacher described perception, serves as the foundation for a third art that is salient in the professional lives of teachers: cooperation. For classroom teachers this means negotiating an alliance with their students. As one teacher commented, "You have to get the students on your side with honesty and a certain amount of candor, so they understand you, and you understand them." This teacher continued, "I'm here to work *with* the kids; I'm not here just to shovel out stuff and let them grab it." The other teachers were also quick to stress the practical value of student-teacher cooperation. One teacher summed it up simply: "You can't force students to do what you want them to do, but if they know you're working hard and care about 'em, from there on it's gravy."

The teachers I observed displayed various strategies for negotiating a cooperative relationship with their students. Some of these strategies include: (1) using humor and self-disclosure to promote teacher-student solidarity, (2) allowing students to choose activities, (3) occasionally bending school and classroom rules in the students' interest, (4) providing opportunities for individual recognition, and (5) creating pockets of time that allow teachers to interact one-to-one with students.

An example of this last strategy, creating pockets of time, is illustrated by a teacher who set aside every Thursday for mini-conferences. On this day, while his students worked independently, he went around the classroom to speak individually with as many students as possible. He justified this routine by insisting that "it helps break the mannequin-like image of me standing up in front of the room. It pays tremendous dividends. It allows the students to ask questions, and I find out a lot."



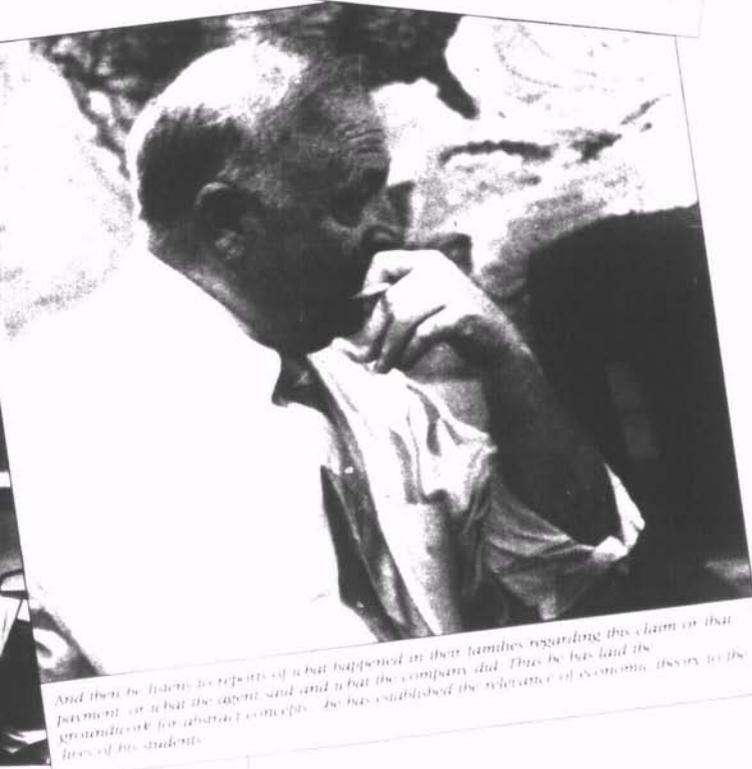
Here ASCD presents the winning series in the 1988 Photo Contest, photographed by Pat Johnson, Mt. Pleasant, NC. This series portrays Norwood Smoak, a teacher of world history and economics, at work in his classroom at Wando High School in Mt. Pleasant.



In his usual interactive style, he begins to pose "what if..." sketches typical situations within the daily lives of the students and eliciting responses from their experiences.



So today in economics class he'll be talking about insurance—concepts of risk and liability. The trick is to extend the students' knowledge by building on what they know, but sometimes the frustration shows.



And then he listens to reports of what happened in their families regarding this claim or that payment or what the agent said and what the company did. This he has laid the groundwork for abstract concepts. He has established the relevance of economic theory to the lives of his students.

Appreciation. The final art of teaching is appreciation. Unlike communication, perception, and cooperation, the art of appreciation is not primarily something that teachers *do*. Instead, it is a product of their artistry and, thus, cannot always be directly observed. Nevertheless, I found it readily apparent in how teachers describe the types of satisfaction they derive from their teaching. As Harper explained: "In almost any job you do, if you do it well, you get a certain ego-satisfaction from it. It's really a good feeling—when I run a discussion—to know that I did it well." Eisner (1983) describes the same idea in another way: "The aesthetic in teaching is the experience secured from being able to put your own signature on your own work—to look at it and say it was good (p. 13)." Both the classroom teacher and the scholar are describing the intrinsic sense of worth that comes from having done a difficult job well. This idea is central to the daily work of classroom teachers.

A Challenge to Educational Leaders

The artistic dimensions that teachers recognize as basic to their profession stand in sharp contrast to the priorities of the new reform movement. Of course, professionalism is about opportunities for career advancement, the expert knowledge teachers possess, and the types of learning that can be easily tested. Yet the day-to-day experience of teachers reminds us that teaching is also about much more. It is about subtle interpersonal skills, discernment, caring, and "ego-satisfaction." These artistic aspects reflect highly complex forms of human expression that may well influence teacher effectiveness more than career ladders and fifth-year preparation programs.

If the art of teaching is to have a future, we must enlarge our understanding of professionalism to include the artistic skills and judgment that good teaching demands. This task presents a challenge to educational leaders for at least two reasons. First, artistry cannot be mandated by the central office. Neither can it be fostered by an afternoon of inservice training once or twice a year. Therefore, we have to think more deeply

about the conditions under which teachers work, their opportunities for interacting with each other, the amount of discretionary time in their daily schedules, the number of students they see each day, and the resources with which they have to work. Second, the art of teaching is simply less well understood than technical aspects of instruction. We know more, for example, about the mechanics of lesson planning, test construction, and curriculum development than we do about how Penelope Harper is able to gracefully orchestrate a class discussion.

The profession can learn much about the complexity and artistry of teaching from colleagues like Penelope Harper. We might begin by cultivating our own abilities to engage teachers in genuine dialogue. Basic to this dialogue is our perceptiveness—learning to see and hear teachers in ways that take us beyond stereotypical images. Like teachers, we must operate in a receptive mode. We might also pro-

mote a cooperative alliance both with and between classroom teachers, for example, by occasionally bending rules for their professional well-being and by involving them in decision making. Finally, we might strive to fully appreciate the multifaceted nature of this collaborative effort as an art and craft in its own right. □

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