

The Teacher

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Bridges of Mutual Benefit

"If you would only truly believe!" pleaded my teacher/researcher workshop instructor as we waited in the snack line during a class break. Her appeal to my fundamental beliefs about learning were spurred by a comment I had made in class that evening on the place of direct instruction in the English curriculum. I needed time to think.

Did I really want to truly believe? Slowly, I began polishing my glasses to remove the specks that were not there. Her words, I thought, evoked Eric Hoffer's (1951) description of a "True Believer." Hoffer defines the True Believer as a person of fanatical faith who is ready to sacrifice his or her life for a holy cause. True Believers rise from the ranks of the frustrated; they assume radical changes to be the sole solution for their problems.

Frustrated? Yes, teachers in the public schools are truly frustrated in our efforts to offer quality education. We are prime targets for each of the curriculum theorists' many rival "right answers." But no, we are not frustrated or guilt ridden to the extent that we are ready to "sacrifice" our autonomy for any one of the curriculum perspectives. Glatthorn's (1980) review of 60 years of educational developments reveals teachers are more "faithful doubters" than "True Believers."

As I settled my spotless glasses back on the bridge of my nose, I replied, "Look at the issue of curriculum not from a philosophical point of view but from one of practicality. I run a writers' workshop that would have Atwell (1987) cheering, but when my principal observed my class, he whispered, 'I'll come back when you're really teaching to do this evaluation.' The 'Madeline Hunter-type' structure of the evaluation form puts constraints on just how free teachers can be."

She guffawed, "Hasn't he heard of Vygotsky (1978)?"

Teachers are not frustrated or guilt ridden to the extent that we are ready to "sacrifice" our autonomy for any one of the curriculum perspectives.

The glasses play wouldn't work twice, but I again needed think time. I stirred my coffee and thought of Robin Barrow's chiding remarks in *Common Sense and the Curriculum* (1976). He ridicules educational leaders who emotely loosely on the desirability of developing critical minds, questioning attitudes, and problem-solving capacities in children, while conspicuously failing to exhibit these qualities in their own reflections. That description didn't fit my principal who, by his actions, had repeatedly demonstrated his awareness and understanding of the rival attitudes and how each could benefit the growth of my students.

I tapped the spoon on the edge of my mug as I spoke, "Of course he stays informed on curriculum developments; therefore, he has also heard of Rosenshine" (1986). We had come to the end of the snack line and apparently the end of our conversation, too. Shaking her head as though to say, "Oh you of such little faith," she turned to another teacher and left me alone, holding my plate of raw vegetables and dip. I moved back to my desk nibbling at a stalk of broccoli. I had encountered the true-believer syndrome at conferences and study institutes as well as in college classes. Those leaders *outside* the

school building who create curriculums want teachers to be skilled technicians of their particular doctrines—they want teachers to be True Believers. Fortunately, I've never encountered a principal—the leader *inside* the building—who didn't prefer teachers who make decisions based on a wide range of options rather than on the only thing they know.

Why, I wondered, are staff development sessions so single-minded? Why can't we model more of them after Glatthorn's (1987) *Curriculum Renewal*, which advocates weaving the strengths of opposing philosophies together for the common good?

The instructor moved to the front of the room. I picked up my pen, ready for class to resume, but jotted this note on the top of my notebook: "Mutual benefit—the most powerful of bridge builders, even if the heart remains bitter." □

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