

An Overture

STUDENTS ARE A LOT LIKE PEOPLE!

Several years ago during a seminar, the audience reaction to the seemingly incredible behavior of the student I was discussing caused me to blurt out the phrase, "Students are a lot like people." The audience and I both laughed at the redundancy of the statement; and yet, since that time, I have found myself explaining away a great many student behaviors that are upsetting or annoying to teachers with this same thought. Each time I repeat the statement "Students are a lot like people" it seems to reorient my perspective about the job of education. Education is a human-to-human process, and, for those of us who teach hundreds of students under rather distressing limitations of space and time, it is easy to forget this. We forget that each human being with whom we deal does not envision himself as a "thing" to be manipulated as an accommodation to our personal goals and needs. More importantly, neither should we visualize our students as "things" no matter how overwhelming the circumstances may seem.

Obviously the best teaching relationship between student and teacher is an adult-to-adult association. Too often this is not the case. I often find myself reacting to the teaching situation as if it were a parent-child relationship. The student, because of his many years of past conditioning, accepts the child identification as his appropriate role so passively it is almost frightening. This acceptance of a parent-child relationship can cause teachers and students to develop attitudes and behaviors that greatly reduce the effectiveness of learning activities. Subconsciously the teacher begins to assume authority and power that is not rightfully his. He is no longer a friend who is guiding, counseling, and assisting but an authority figure who demands obedience and whose knowledge cannot be challenged. The student in his child-role resents this attitude and his resentment often may be transferred to the subject being learned.

Some bridges I have found helpful in reducing the chasm between teacher and student are rather simple, and they can easily be incorporated into any kind of learning arrangement. Nearly all students appreciate being greeted with a handshake the first day of class. Even though this encounter must be brief when one has several hundred students, still one can ask the student's name, his home town, and his major area of interest in a reasonably short time. In a large course small discussion groups are usually scheduled, and at the first meeting of this small group the senior instructor in the course can greet each student individually during the usual filling out of cards and forms and as photographs are being taken. The photo-

graphs can be used to assist the instructor in learning names and faces of all his students and they are taken with 35-mm cameras and contact printed so the cost is not excessive. It does require a great deal of time of the senior professor during the first week to be available at the beginning of some 40-plus sessions, but it seems to be worth it (at least to the professor).

A second device is to have a coffee urn available in the learning center so students can sit and visit with instructors over a cup of coffee. This has its problems but the advantages seem to outweigh the problems.

And there are other possibilities:

An original typewritten letter from the senior instructor to all "A" students in the course congratulating the student on his success. This letter is usually sent to the home address, and the teacher often receives thank-you letters from the parents as well as from many students who appreciate this consideration.

An open house on Sunday afternoon in the instructor's home is attractive to some students. Usually the number who can attend, even in a large enrollment course, is not overwhelming, but students who do not come still appreciate the opportunity and often express their thanks.

An instructor can set aside specific times at home and invite students to phone for a discussion of problems or just visit casually.

There are probably many ideas other teachers have used which could be shared through letters to the editor of this journal. Why not send in your suggestions?

One should not expect all students to respond to various activities in the same way, and in many cases students do not take advantage of the opportunities made available to them. However, it is not as important that the student participate as it is that the opportunity be available. People react positively to people who treat them as adults and show concern for their welfare.

The education process is a people-to-people process. It takes a lot of discipline on the part of a teacher to ignore some of the frustrations created by thoughtless students and to construct a program for the large mass of interested and highly motivated individuals in the classroom. Can you imagine a student ignoring the beautiful slides I took of the Colorado tundra to do math problems? I don't have to imagine it—I saw it. Students are a lot like people!

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