

The College Teacher And Social Responsibility

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IT MAY WELL SEEM presumptuous for me to write about social responsibilities of my teaching colleagues half way around the globe. For me, however, there is a commonality and centrality to teaching that transcends latitude and longitude, nationality and race, language and custom, and even time. Teacher is teacher is teacher.

Foremost and fundamentally, a teacher is one of the most powerful forces of acculturation. The teacher is socializing agent *par excellence* serving as the conduit for transmission of man's history as a biological and social being. It is the teacher who places man in the context of his past, his present, and his future, in the comfort of his mythology and discomfort of reality, in glory for his achievement and censure for his failings. It is the teacher who opens portals to understanding and insight, who sets the conditions for creative expression and innovative conceptualizing, and provides for practical application.

These idealizations are met in varying degrees and even not at all, by some of our teaching kin. On some of these ideals, there is general consensus. Few teachers would deny their function as the expert transmitting information and responding to questions: an encyclopedia programmed with the data, theories, history, and pedagogy of the discipline. Would that all of us could be so replete with information and so well programmed to deliver it on call! But even with respective shortcomings, most teachers not only conceive their role well but execute it aggressively.

It is in the extenuation of teacher as socializing agent, when the teacher moves from the security of the known to the uncertainty of creative innovation and application, that greater disagreement about role and function obtains. Some teachers maintain that the so-

cializing role is not their proper function; more will argue vehemently that the practical is irrelevant and even inimical to scholarship. This kind of spurious position of academics has led increasingly to justifiable public accusations of fatuousness at all levels of education.

Whatever complacency may have obtained among scientists and science teachers regarding their roles as socializing agents was shattered with the explosions of the atomic and hydrogen bombs thirty years ago. Technology had been increasingly a pattern of academic concern, but largely in a derisive and disparaging manner. These detonations in the 1940s brought science forthrightly and squarely into the world of political reality. Subsequently came the initiation of space exploration with Sputnik in 1957, and later the environmental "crises" concerning supersonic transports, defoliants, and DDT, and the human "crises" concerning the population explosion and food and resource shortages. All these societal events could no longer be denied a place in the classroom even though it took uprisings at Berkeley, Columbia, and other campuses to stimulate a response in academia. The universality and ubiquity of the social significance of science can not be denied—especially in the classroom or lecture hall.

Social Consciousness in the Classroom

My work with college teachers over the past years has provided considerable testimony to an increasing expression of social consciousness in the classroom. In a series of short courses, for instance, nearly all the participants felt it was their proper role to not only articulate their personal positions on issues of social consequence but also to activate their students to "do something" about the particular issue(s) at hand. Importantly, the common view of these college teachers was that this was by and large a new phenomenon, that they would not have so acted ten to fifteen years earlier, and that then it was decidedly neither incumbent upon them to do so nor was it professionally acceptable.

A second line of evidence for this phenomenon of classroom social consciousness comes from a survey I recently conducted for the Educational Testing Service on the Advanced Placement Program in Biology. From the group of colleges receiving the greatest number of requests for advanced placement in biology, we found that fifty-four out of sixty-eight offered special courses for the "general education" student. But even more significant was the array of titles and emphases of such courses—environmental resources, population and food supplies, genetic manipulation, control of human evolution, and so on. The majority of these courses have social immediacy and potential or actual practical applicability. Well-informed colleagues in engineering, physics, chemistry, earth sciences, psychology, and sociology relate that parallel curricular developments are taking place in those disciplines as well.

The Classroom in the Real World

The Evergreen State College, which opened its doors in 1971 and now in 1973 has 2,3000 students and 110 faculty, has embarked on a total program which brings reality to the classroom and the classroom to reality. In the first instance, a fundamental philosophical foundation on which the entire curriculum rests is that there is a unity to life. The world is a whole, each individual's life is a whole—his loves, hates, favors, prejudices; if this is indeed the nature of Nature and of the student, then as Evergreen believes, education should be of the whole. Implementing a holistic system or synthesis has taken expression largely in the form of broadly conceived, problem or theme oriented year-long interdisciplinary studies in which the student is immersed 100%; that is, the student's time is not fractioned among several courses simultaneously. In these coordinated studies, as we term them, science, social science, humanities, and art interact, interdigitate, interweave in fashion not dissimilar from their interaction and interweaving in the "real world." These are the forces of men's minds working in concert—sometimes symphonically, sometimes cacophonously, always authentically.

Whereas the interdisciplinary orientation is of primary concern, Evergreen recognizes that to remain viable it must be sensitive to the world outside and responsive to its changes by building in a capacity for modifiability. That it has done, through instituting a self-destructive system affecting each interdisciplinary program at the year's end: to be repeated another time, a program must justify a need to be served. There are no guarantees of existence and hence no fossilizing of a particular set of programs.

Many of the interdisciplinary programs provide opportunity for the student to engage in an off-campus learning experience referred to as an internship. The intern, although tied to the college through a sponsoring faculty member, is however under the direct, daily supervision of a person who earns his living by what the intern has a chance to learn about—as a banker, a research chemist, a lawyer, an agency administrator, a museum curator, and so on. This "real world" experience is carefully articulated by the faculty member with a concurrent academic experience in reading, researching, report writing, and tutorial conferences.

Some programs develop an unusual combination of theory and practice. A prime example has been one in urban planning in which, after several months of "hitting the books," the group undertook a project dealing with the relocation of a small community about to be flooded as a proposed new dam was completed. Not only was the project real, the proposals for relocation which came from the study are now being implemented. Consider the learning reinforcement from such a vital experience.

Increasingly in the minds of The Evergreen State

College is a large and potential clientele of students generally well beyond the 18–21-year-old-group which has been the characteristic target audience in American higher education. Increased leisure time, early retirement, rapidly shifting and expanding job opportunities are among the factors creating a unique demand for new kinds of programs on the campus. This brings challenge to design new and appropriate programs; it reaps incalculable reward as different age groups come together to learn. This challenge often calls for programs external to the central campus and generally oriented to much more practical political and social concerns and applications than that to which the traditional academician is accustomed. Recognizing as they do the somewhat tenuous nature of their contemporary esteem, American colleges will probably not fail to respond constructively and creatively to these challenges, although for most institutions the entrenched tradition will be agonizingly slow to act. As a young college directed to nontraditional approaches, Evergreen is in a unique position to respond.

Traditional and conventional attitudes concerning the relation of the classroom and the real world bespeak of teachers whose heads, like the proverbial ostrich's, get buried in the sand. No matter how long the head is hidden, however, the problems will not go away; if they do, they will be replaced by yet others more or less or as severe. The teacher has an inherent role as a socializing agent and an incumbent responsibility to manifest it. There is no alternative.

Project: Knowledge 2000

A bicentennial project aimed at achieving a better understanding of our knowledge needs for the next quarter-century is being sponsored by NSF, the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, and Xerox Corporation as part of the nation's bicentennial celebration.

Knowledge—how it will be used, how it will be created, and how it will be transmitted to serve society's needs better between now and the year 2000—will be discussed and analyzed by some 350 leaders from a variety of fields in the U.S. and other countries. "Project: Knowledge 2000" will examine that subject in three-day forums, each three days in length, to be held in 1976 in Leesburg, Va.

After each forum, videotape cassettes and discussion guides will be distributed for group discussion in communities across the nation. The goal of the project is to stimulate widespread thinking and discussion at local levels about the generation, transmission, and uses of knowledge in the context of local situations and special concerns.