

## FLYING BLIND: SOME REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING

*“Certainly, anyone who has worked with children in an inquiry environment knows what a delightful, fitful, episodic, explosive collage of simultaneous ‘happenings’ learning is. If the learning process must be visualized, perhaps it is most authentically represented in a Jackson Pollock canvas- a canvas whose colours increase in intensity as intellectual power grows (for learning is exponentially cumulative).*

*From all this, you must not conclude that there is no logic to the learning process. There is. But it is best described as a ‘psycho-logic’, whose rules sequences, spirals and splotches are established by living, squirming, questioning, perceiving, fearing, loving, above all, languaging nervous systems. Bear in mind that the purpose of the enquiry method is to help learners increase their competence as learners.”*

*‘Teaching as a Subversive Activity’: Postman & Weingartner*

Flying blind, by instinct and intuition: a vertiginous sense pervades that I really do not know what is happening in my class or what someone is learning. Eventually I can have no power over how, when and where a student really learns something. All the careful planning dissolves in human personality – it is impossible to separate out the sediment of content from the murky liquid of situation and deal with that alone. Learning takes the whole person and one faces the entirety of that person with his or her moods, fears, desires, expectations, prejudices, abilities and past experience.

The communication is tentative; a faint and crackly line of filter and exchange. Nowhere have I learnt so much about how imperfectly we communicate with one another than in a classroom: it is never what you think you are saying that goes in and, years later, one is hit by the proof when a student will seek you out and present you again with some throw-away comment which you immediately forgot and but that he caught, nurtured and took as the meaning and focus of your course.

Neither can one choose the moment or place of confidence, or illumination that leads to change: a hesitant and timid figure will lurk to offer himself at just the moment when you are most exhausted and unreceptive. But that is *their* moment and if you lose it with a careless response the opportunity to ever teach that person may be lost (I have the memory of a boy who chose for his moment the middle of a class when I was occupied with twenty,

thirteen year olds in a pottery - my reply was distracted and curt and I lost him. It took me a split seconds to know – but that was too late).

The responsibility is terrifying.

Then, rearing above the individual, is the pulsating, many headed beast of the class, each with its own will and chemistry, never the same. Making all attempts at a neat and definitive organization of a class impossible, even if it's one I have taught for years - there are too many variables and what will be perfectly successful for one group of students may be total failure with another.

But not being able to fix absolutely is not the same as not knowing and not being able to lay a class out like a production line, bolting in knowledge in a defined sequence is not the same as abandoning everything to chance and disorder. Post-Modernism has been about the death of Absolutes and it must affect teaching as much as every other area of life ; I believe that twentieth century Utopian schemes in both politics and architecture were underpinned by a conviction in the absolute power of science to explain. Their failure of both has necessitated a redefinition of the characteristics and limitations of our knowledge and the language of physics and religion find that they have more in common than they could possibly have imagined. The model must be different: not fixed and absolute, but more like a dance in which the pattern and structure are strong but flexible and ever moving.

In his book 'The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat" Oliver Sacks is talking about medicine but if one replaces the words 'patient' and 'physician' by 'student' and 'teacher' the advice is equally relevant to teachers:

*"One must drop all presuppositions and dogmas and rules- for these only lead to stalemates or disaster; one must cease to regard all patients as replicas, and honour each one with individual attention, attention to how he is doing, to his individual reactions and propensities; and in this way, with the patient as one's equal, one's co-explorer, not one's puppet, one may find therapeutic ways which are better than other ways, tactics which can be modified as the occasion requires. Given a 'policy-space' no longer simple or convergent, an*

*intuitive 'feel' is the only sage guide; and in this the patient may well surpass his physician."*

However much one can inspire, encourage, bully or entreat, you cannot do the learning for the students: however well one prepares classes, you cannot make people learn. When I began teaching I judged the success of my classes on my own level of organization and activity. It took me a long time to understand that the more I did, the less the students were doing and this did not necessarily achieve the most efficient learning. I have come to believe that teaching is about providing structure (time structure and firm deadlines; along with procedural and behavioural expectations), inspiration (the example of your own life, work and enthusiasms), material (or the information about where material is) and, above all encouragement.

Learning means growing and changing. Piaget coined the terms of 'assimilation' and 'adoption' for the process: we first have to understand something new to our experience in terms of what we already know and then enlarge and expand our interior 'map' of what the world is like to take account of this new information. Such insight, interiorization and growth and change do not come to order. Such births are erratic, painful and exhausting. To achieve them we have to let go of closed mental sets that make life comfortable and safe. This, in turn takes trust and we need support and encouragement, not criticism and attack (we usually manage plenty of that by ourselves).

By adulthood, most of us are not efficient learners. We do not listen well, we have poor concentration skills, tend to block learning with premature judgments, conclusions and expectations about how and what we should be learning. We are poor at the sort of self-awareness without criticism that is indispensable for progress and, above all, we mostly seem to be afraid to fail: we hang on for dear life to those mental sets that make us feel safe and thus inhibit our own progress. A large part of teaching is removing barriers that people erect that prevent them from learning. We need support and love with the strength that that gives and thus teaching becomes about loving;

that particular form of loving that Christianity is based on.

What any person can learn at any moment depends on how they feel at that moment about the task; whether they are confident or discouraged; enthusiastic or tired. One must sense the mood and respond to it. It is the necessity for this openness - the constant testing of atmosphere with bruised nerve endings that is so tiring and that leaves teachers wrung out at the end of the day. "If you don't really enjoy people don't teach" - that was a good piece of advice.

And if one makes all this effort if one is loving, open, concerned and sensitive, one must expect nothing in return and must never mistake it for a 'normal' relationship. While they are students your relationship is professional and your survival depends on a certain distance; I have seen so many teachers marked with disappointment and bitterness; a look of martyrdom when their infinite concern and effort and giving made them vulnerable and they were slapped across the face with indifference or unthinking words. You may be infinitely rewarded in ways you did not expect and, later, perhaps, you will make friends from your students - in any case, for better or for worse, you will be part of their life forever.