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Toward a Broader Definition of Teaching

The nation-wide financial pinch of the 1970's has produced obvious fiscal difficulties in our educational system. In colleges and universities, it has led to unusually close scrutiny of applications for appointment, tenure, and promotion of faculty members.

Part of the debate about faculty advancement in a time of fiscal retrenchment has centered on the role of teaching. In some postsecondary institutions, there has been a preoccupation with utilitarian concerns and, with it, a reaffirmation of the primacy of teaching (as opposed, presumably, to research). In others, there has been a contrasting emphasis on "upgrading" of faculty (now forced to sell themselves in a buyers' market), which works to the advantage of those academicians who have achieved status in their disciplines, usually by prestigious publication.

In both cases, it is taken for granted that the definition of "teaching" is self-evident. I submit, however, that, like most other supposedly self-evident matters, our understanding of the substance of teaching is anything but clear.

Most discussions of teaching implicitly equate it with *pedagogy* — that is, instruction of institutionally enrolled youngsters, most accurately termed matriculants but more often called students, by licensed elders, known as educators. At least three other kinds of teaching are ignored in this equation. The first of these is mutual instruction by teachers in a "community of scholars," the ideal goal of which is sharing of ideas and pooling of knowledge. I shall here refer to this reciprocal teaching as *dialog.*

The second such kind of teaching is *publication,* not only in its conventional sense of disseminating information through books and journals but also in its literal sense of making public what one has to say, by mass media appearances, circuit lecturing, or forensic encounters of various kinds. In either case, the audience is extramural — larger, probably, than in the classroom, though less subject to supervision.

The third, and generally the least appreciated, of these neglected forms of teaching is *autodidaxis,* or teaching oneself. On the whole, I should say that it is the most important form of teaching. Certainly every accomplished scholar or writer must be an autodidact. And no professor is likely to be an effective communicator of ideas who has not previously assimilated, criticized, and reorganized those ideas for himself. In fact, most of the lifelong learning that is recommended to academicians, who are encouraged to keep abreast of the progress of knowledge, is actually a form of active self-teaching rather than a passive information absorption.

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Furthermore, it is not only with regard to audience that we tend unnecessarily to circumscribe our conception of teaching. We do so equally with regard to agency: who the teachers are. For, even if we use the term "professor" broadly, to include Tutors, Instructors, Lecturers, and the like, a moment's reflection should suffice to remind us that professors are far from being the only teachers in the world of higher education. To the degree that they capture the imagination of the academic community, creative administrators are also teachers, and indispensable ones. Needless to say, the same assertion can be made of inventive trustees, alumni, and other associates of academia.

Even when we confine our attention to matriculated students, it remains a question whether professors are their most effective teachers. Most of the evidence from social and educational psychology indicates strongly that, for anyone beyond pre-school age, peer influences outweigh intergenerational ones. What this clearly implies is that, however occupationally reluctant the professoriate may (understandably) be to acknowledge the fact, students normally learn far more from one another on an informal basis than they do from their elders in classroom settings. This observation remains true even if we modify our description of faculty instruction so as to include advisory as well as classroom functions.

Campuses, moreover, are far from being hermetically sealed. Rural as well as urban institutions of higher education are open to extramural influences of many kinds. Popular writers, successful journalists, and leading politicians all reach the eyes and ears of academic communities, helping to shape their attitudes as well as to supply them with information. Such opinion-molders may reasonably be viewed as serving, indirectly at least, not only as teachers of students but also as teachers as professors, administrators, and trustees.

Finally, the crucial role of parents as teachers is a truism. Although college students tend to be intellectually rebellious and hence to reject explicit parental pronouncements, they remain subliminally subject to parental influence in two important ways. First, as toddlers they had their preverbal and protoverbal attitudes shaped almost exclusively by their parents, so that their youthful verbalizations are often only rationalized modifications of these parental views. And, second, their tuition purse-strings are usually held by their parents, a fact which can scarcely help exercising a strong, if indirect, influence on their disciplinary orientations and occupational goals.

Still another way in which we circumscribe our conception of teaching is by assuming that teaching is inherently beneficent. Were this so, the mistrust of professors shown by some parents, alumni, and trustees would be inexplicable. But it becomes quite explicable when we recognize that many non-faculty adults perceive the role of faculty members as one which does not so much inform students as subvert their political, social, and religious standards. Before rejecting this picture of their pedagogical function as a caricature, professors might do well to reflect that the chief purpose of many freshman college courses is often explicitly described as being that of combatting "the conventional wisdom" that students bring with them. Implicit in this openly polemic stance is a view of most parents and many elementary and secondary school instructors as "bad" teachers, where the word "bad" does not mean ineffective but, on the contrary, all too effective in the propagation of error.

From a semantic standpoint, the verb "teach" is the causative of the verb "learn": to teach is to induce learning. If learning theory were a field marked by

widespread consensus, this equation might go far toward helping us understand the nature of teaching. Unfortunately, however, few processes are as mysterious as that involved in the acquisition of knowledge. Psychologists and educationists, who are generally regarded as the experts in this area, cannot agree on just what learning is, still less on how it takes place. And their most heated debates are reserved for the question of how learning is best facilitated, especially in the classroom.

Since other disciplines leave us in doubt about the definition and implementation of teaching, there may be room for an anthropological approach to the problem.

One of the hallmarks of anthropology is its evolutionary perspective, as regards both cultural and biological subject matters. When we inspect man's prehuman ancestry from an evolutionary standpoint, one of the first observations we must make is that learning is a behavioral characteristic of an overwhelming majority of our animal ancestors, both lineal and collateral. While jellyfish are apparently incapable of any responses beyond reflexive ones, flatworms, starfish, and all vertebrates can and do learn, in the sense that they clearly modify their behavior on the basis of new experience.

Among the non-human members of our own zoological class, the mammals, learning seems not only to occur with great frequency but to be deliberately induced. Induced learning, of course, is teaching. And prehuman mammalian teaching appears to be of two different types. The first and more doubtful type is *teaching by example.* It looks as though adult carnivores are doing this when they take their young with them on hunting forays, although it can be and sometimes is argued that the learning which takes place in these circumstances is an unplanned if fortunate result of the confluence of adult predation with juvenile sociability rather than a manifestation of mammalian educative proclivities. The second and less suspect type of teaching by mammals is *training.* Training seems to occur when an adult female cuffs her immature offspring to deter them from behavior which is either irritating to her or dangerous to them.

Human teaching includes not only these two types but also two others which are, so far as can now be determined, unique to our species. These two are indoctrination and induced insight. *Indoctrination* is restrictively human in the sense that it requires verbal inculcation. *Induced insight,* which may be termed enlightenment, is presumably human to the extent that it requires comprehension of a principle as opposed to memorization of detail.

The usual anthropological statement of human uniqueness defines man as the distinctively culture-bearing animal, where culture is understood as consisting of cumulative, verbally mediated, traditional behavior. In educational terms, this definition can readily be rephrased to state that culture is traditional behavior most of which is actively taught rather than (as in the case of most socially inherited animal behavior) passively learned. This view of culture as teaching is, to be sure, no novel product of contemporary behavioral studies. The classical Greek noun *paidefa,* variably translatable as "discipline" or "cultivation," was derived from the base of the verb *paideúo*, "to rear or educate."

Let me return now to the theme of mutual instruction, or dialog, referred to above. Of all forms of teaching and associated activity, it is, I think, the most neglected in our colleges — at least by faculty members. The proverbial "community of scholars" has become fossilized not only as a phrase but also as a functioning

social structure. By this I do not mean that professors fail to socialize: cliques and kaffeeklatsches abound on our campuses. Nor do I mean that faculty members lack channels of information exchange: gossip and rumor move from department to department with a speed that puts many city tabloids to shame. What I do mean is that faculty conversations are all too typically restricted either to "shop talk" about institutional operations or to trivia concerning menus and weather.

In such campus exchanges, intellectual curiosity is not only conspicuous by its absence but, in most cases, perceived as an aberration. Surprising though it must seem to a non-academician, scholarly discussions, unless directed to curricular planning or grant applications, are usually viewed by faculty members as pretentious. And it is hard to say which of the two complementary functions, teaching one's colleagues or learning from one's colleagues, is more suspect. When, as a young instructor, I first realized that my efforts to impart elements of my specialties to peers were unappreciated, I naively assumed that what was resented was my casting myself in the role of teacher. Since my general curiosity exceeded my disciplinary confidence in any case, I quickly — and with some feeling of relief — switched roles from that of willing teacher to that of eager learner. But I was then even more surprised to discover that this role, perhaps because it was seen as demeaning to faculty dignity, was no more acceptable than the other. Whether as questioner or as answerer, I found, the Socratic figure is an ideal only to the extent that he remains disembodied.

The practical, as opposed to theoretical, ideal of inter-faculty relations in contemporary academia seems to be remarkably close to the ideal of international relations: mutual non-interference. The unspoken agreement between professors appears to be, "If you don't question my views or practices, I won't question yours." It is difficult to account in any other way for the strong feeling (manifest in avoidance behavior) that classroom visitation, especially on the part of administrators, constitutes invasion of academic privacy. The traditional "ivory tower" image of academia takes on a new appropriateness when interpreted as symbolizing not the separation of academe from the secular world and its conflicts but the retention in academe of a medieval form of secular conflict, in which every office, classroom, and department is seen as a castle surrounded by a moat of intellectual as well as operational non-interventionism.

Yet another of the familiar clichés about academic life is its devotion to "the pursuit of truth". Like most clichés, it has some validity. To the extent that Truth (spelled with a capital T) represents the current consensus in any given discipline, most academicians are fiercely devoted to it and rigidly resistant to whatever they perceive as threatening it. What they usually pursue, however, is not fresh insight into the cognitive problems posed by their disciplines but additional evidence or stronger arguments in support of the consensus. Although academicians generally think of themselves as sceptical, critical, and intellectually independent, they tend to be so only with regard to the ideas of the non-academic majority of the population, which they are often too quick to brand as naive, uninformed, and fallacious. With regard to what Francis Bacon might have called "the idols of academia," they are surprisingly subject to group pressure. Intellectual fashions, no less transient and arbitrary than sartorial styles, readily enthrall the campus crowd.

In at least one respect, moreover, it would not be unfair to say that normal academic practice tends to obscure rather than to reveal truth. Academicians generally, and professors particularly, seem to have exceptionally tender egos, with the result that the conventional diplomacy of the political and commerical

worlds not only cannot be dispensed with in college life but is often more necessary there than anywhere else. And, while it may contribute to the social comfort of campus communities, such inter-professorial diplomacy clearly contravenes the intellectual openness professed by scholars, who find it equally perilous either publicly to discuss or behaviorally to disregard the institutional political jockeying that daily goes on around them.

Since Clark Kerr introduced the term "multiversity" into academic discourse, it has become a truism that contemporary universities are being increasingly divorced from their presumptive goal, which is so to unify human knowledge as to produce a universality of outlook. Instead, our universities appear to suffer from progressive internecine competition and intellectual fragmentation.

If this situation may fairly be styled "the anemia of academia," it seems reasonable to ask what, if any, remedy for the condition can be descried. While the practical steps to be taken are obviously many and difficult and must inevitably extend over a period of decades, I believe that the first move must be an increase in awareness of our predicament. As I see it, we academicians have long been saying to one another, in effect, "Don't try to teach me anything, and I won't try to teach you anything." But, because this tacit bargain contradicts the glittering generalities of our profession, we have succeeded, for the most part, in remaining unconscious of it.

Here the unavoidable question becomes that of determining why we are so reluctant to teach or be taught anywhere but in the classroom. My tentative answer is that we have not yet rid ourselves of the ancient equation of learning with suffering, first represented by the dual value of the Egyptian verb which meant both "teach" and "punish" and which persists in the retributive intent of such contemporary locutions as "I'll teach you!" In its place, I would commend the attitude of Chaucer's Clerk of Oxford, of whom his creator wrote that "gladly would he learn and gladly teach."

In any case, for those of us who claim to value freedom, it seems particularly fitting to assert that teaching "is and of right ought to be" more than the discipline of pupils by a dominie. Teaching is simultaneously liberating and fulfilling activity-liberating to the extent that it frees us from the confinements of ignorance and fulfilling to the extent that it gratifies our urge to share knowledge. And such liberating fulfillment need by no means be bureaucratically restricted to university matriculants and course enrollees. Whoever disseminates information and understanding acts as a teacher, and whoever benefits from that dissemination acts as a student. Regardless of their age or status, willing teacher-students enrich both themselves and the world around them. It is they only who fully justify the creation and maintenance of the institutions in which they serve.