

Needed: A Valid Concept of Teaching

ASK almost any group of teachers what for us is a basic question—what is teaching?—and you are likely to get as many different answers as you have different teachers responding.

Some will call teaching an art, and in poetic terms attempt to describe what they mean. Others will say teaching is a science and attempt to analyze the process in terms of its component parts. Others will describe what they have observed themselves and other teachers doing, and say, "This is teaching." Each definition will emphasize different points depending upon what the individual teacher writing the definition feels is important.

Educated laymen will likely vary even more than teachers in their definitions of teaching. To illustrate, a brilliant young minister preached a sermon on the text, "Beware of false teachers." He stated: "We are *all* teachers, for what we do and say sets an example for the people around us, and thus our every act is an act of teaching." To him, apparently, living and teaching are the same, and it behooves teachers to live well. On the other hand, an equally brilliant young lawyer in the congregation, after the service said: "He is wrong about teaching—to me teaching is the specific act of one who knows the answer telling or explaining the answer to those

who don't know it. It is that simple."

Even among psychologists, who are considered as specialists in the process of learning and hence of teaching, are found quite different concepts of the process of teaching. For instance, the psychologists who see learning as a process of conditioning will define teaching in terms of what teachers do in order properly to condition pupils so they will respond correctly to the various stimuli of their environment. On the other hand, those who see learning as "an individual's personal discovery of meaning" emphasize, in teaching, procedures designed to involve learners in defining their own purposes and problems, and in formulating and testing plans for achieving those purposes and solving those problems.

Clearly, it is evident that teaching means different things to different people, and that many of the concepts held by the different individuals are inadequate as guides to the improvement of teaching. We have a justifiable concern for the achievement of quality in education. We are finding it necessary, for example, to react to the many pressures which are demanding that teachers be employed and rewarded on the basis of merit (presumably the effectiveness of their teaching). One of our greatest needs today, therefore, is a more valid concept of the bases, structure and dy-

namics of teaching. We need better answers to the questions: "What does teaching involve at this juncture in the history of civilization in general, and in American society in particular?" and "How can we effectively structure the process in order to assure quality in teaching?"

As Goodson has said: "The simple structure of the process (teaching) is a teacher-learner relationship initiated by the teacher."¹ This may appear to be a simple process, but what it involves is exceedingly complex. For instance, what is "in the interest of the learner"? Is it in the interest of the learner to indoctrinate him with a rigid body of dogma which he is to accept without question? Is it in the learner's interest, on the other hand, to leave it entirely to him to decide what is "in his interest"? Or again, is it in the interest of some learners (the academically talented) to pressure them into "accelerated" courses in science and mathematics which "challenge" them to such an extent that they have no time left for anything else? And for others (the not-so-talented) to assign them to courses in which they may learn vocational skills which are needed by society today, but which may be obsolete by the time the learners finish school?

Obviously, determining what is in the interest of the learner is the problem of determining what the objectives of teaching are, or should be. If we improve the technology of teaching as we consider this problem, we might conceivably develop a technology that will achieve objectives which are contrary to the interest of the learner as well as to the interest of the society which supports the school. Hence, in spite of the fact

that much energy and thought have already gone into efforts to define the legitimate objectives of teaching in our society, this effort must be continued if we are to develop a more adequate concept of teaching.

The kinds of objectives implied in the foregoing do not exist in a vacuum. Neither do they exist "under the skin" of the learner, nor entirely within the fabric of the society in which the learner lives, unless, of course, we assume and accept an absolute, fixed and authoritarian society which demands unwavering conformity on the part of the learner. A more acceptable concept holds that these objectives grow out of the interaction of the individual and his environment—natural and cultural, or as Hadley M. Cantril, in *The Why of Man's Experience*, has expressed it, out of "the transactions of living" of the individual.² The objectives of teaching from this point of view include learning in the form of knowledge, insight, values and skills. Such learning is not likely to be mastered by chance; nevertheless the learner must be able to perform these "transactions of living" with maximum effectiveness if he is to achieve significance in his own life and enrichment for his culture. Therefore, since our knowledge of the nature of the individual, the nature of society, and the nature of the interrelationships between the two—if you will, the "transactions of living" of the individual—is continuously growing, our study of these phenomena and what they imply for the objectives must continue, if teaching is to achieve and maintain proper focus.

A second basic dimension in an adequate concept of teaching concerns the nature of learning. While much still re-

¹ Lindley J. Stiles, Editor. *The Teacher's Role In American Society*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957. p. 146.

² Hadley M. Cantril. *The Why of Man's Experience*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1951.

mains to be learned, the relatively young behavioral sciences, particularly psychology, social psychology, psychiatry, and anthropology have contributed much in recent years to an understanding of the nature of learning, and of the conditions under which various types of learning take place. Much of what has been learned about learning has had little impact on teaching. In too many cases we still apply a concept of teaching which ignores what has been learned about learning. Clearly, if teaching is to achieve status as a full-blown profession, we must actively utilize what is known about learning in the development of a more adequate concept of teaching. Our achievements in nuclear science and space technology could never have occurred if our scientists had contented themselves with studying the nature of matter while continuing to limit themselves in technology to the application of the concepts of Newtonian physics. Yet, this is essentially similar to what we have done in teaching.

In our efforts to develop a more adequate concept of teaching, at least two major continuous projects are due within the profession. First, we need to develop "the practice of teaching" as a profession in contrast to a craft or trade. This would involve the development of a theory of teaching growing out of a systematic study of such disciplines as philosophy and the various behavioral sciences. On the basis of such theory we need to examine the "practice of teaching" as a process in terms of its consistency with valid facts, principles and purposes, related both to the nature of society and the nature of learning. Where present procedures fail to relate adequately to what is known, and fail to achieve valid objectives, new procedures must be developed.

Development of such a theory is a job for the practicing members of the profession. Essentially this is a two-dimensional job: (a) a continuing evaluation of what we do in relation to its purpose and to the effectiveness of achievement; and (b) experimental teaching designed to develop more effective techniques for the achievement of valid concepts of what is "in the interest of the learner."

This first major project would involve all professional practitioners of teaching in a continuing program of action research, designed to keep our concept of teaching and our technology of teaching "up to date," and mutually consistent. In this effort individual teachers and school faculties would be involved in continuous examination of their procedures in terms of the appropriateness and effectiveness of those procedures in achieving valid learning objectives. They would utilize all available knowledge concerning the nature of society and the nature of learning in their efforts to develop more effective techniques.

Although much is already known about the nature of learning, and the conditions under which individuals achieve adequacy in our society, our knowledge in these areas is still in its infancy and far from adequate. A second major project, therefore, is one which would involve competent scholars in fundamental research designed to increase our knowledge of the phenomenon of learning on the human level; of what constitutes human adequacy in our complex transitional society, and the conditions under which such adequacy might be achieved. The behavioral scientists are already making progress in this respect. Their efforts need to be intensified, and members of the teaching profession need to be involved, along with the psychol-

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Maturity

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have clear understanding of the importance that he assigns to each value and to establish his actions in terms of this rank order of his values. Helping students to recognize the conflict in their values and to begin to clarify the importance assigned to each is a process of helping the student become more mature. Simply asking, "What do you believe?"—the place where many teachers stop—is not enough. The important question is, "Of the things you believe, to which do you give priority and what does that priority mean for your course of action in the present dilemma?" To help adolescents develop this skill, the teacher will need to demonstrate the way he uses his own values in making decisions.

Any teacher who pretends to an adolescent that he has reached maturity will be less effective in helping young people become mature. No one achieves complete maturity. Each person finds some occasion when he reflects immature behavior. He needs to recognize this and to help adolescents recognize it, too. A part of this contribution by the adult to adolescents is to be able to say honestly to them that he has made a mistake and to apologize. Adults do not lose face when they apologize for an evident mistake. They lose face when they pretend to adolescents that they never make a mistake and are never wrong.

A major aspect of gaining maturity is the recognition that maturity is always in the future, something for which you unceasingly strive but never expect to attain fully. The 16-year-old will feel very mature if he constantly compares himself to the 12-year-old. But if he looks at 20-year-olds, 25-year-olds, 35-year-olds, he will see that maturity at 16 is still not maturity. The important thing to remem-

ber is that as long as the attainment of maturity is in the future, the opportunity for increased perfection is constantly with us. Once maturity has been obtained, if it could be, the possibility of perfectibility is gone. Our hope lies in the open door to adults to attain greater maturity. The adult who performs his mature role with the class keeps this idea constantly before him and before his pupils in the thinking process, in the discipline situation, and in evaluation.

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ogists, social psychologists, biologists, cultural anthropologists and others.

What, then, is teaching? At present, teaching is many things to many people, and there is a need for a more adequate concept of the meaning of the term. In seeking to clarify this concept, perhaps a definition appropriate for the present emerges. Perhaps teaching is the application of the best known principles of human behavior in efforts to promote the highest possible achievement of personal adequacy through learning. In addition it involves the teacher in continuous study to discover new knowledge concerning the nature of personal adequacy in our society, and the processes involved in the achievement of such adequacy. As such knowledge is learned, teaching—both as to objectives and techniques—changes, somewhat as the "practice of medicine" changes with the discovery of new knowledge and the development of new techniques appropriate to this new knowledge.

Perhaps through such study we can progressively achieve a more valid concept of the appropriate structure and dynamics of teaching for our age.

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