IN RESONANCE WITH STUDENTS

FRANCES MINOR
Assistant Professor of Education
New York University, New York, New York

"I LIKE Mrs. F. the best. She's better'n anybody. She doesn't just hear what you have to say; she listens!" This comment by a child, overheard in a discussion on teachers, is a significant insight. Hearing implies mere sensory intake—non-response; listening, attentively directing sense(s) and mind to intake—i.e., response. Sensory intakes, without responses, are stillbirths.

Listening ears, *observing* eyes—sensibility—differentiate the technician from the teacher. The technician goes through motions. For him there is but specific knowledge of specific tasks. Knowledge is limited, and mostly arrived at by mere rote, mnemonic mastery. The teacher, responding, thus *resonates with children.* To be "in resonance" [1] carries many images: vibrating, pulsating, echoing—an ebb and flow in classroom interaction.

Vitality marks the curriculum which offers children opportunities for exploring, discovering and extending their views of our world's wonders—and difficulties. Each human is his own agent, participating in, and coping with this world he must share. In such classrooms, teachers, as well as students, feel free to sense and respond—in *authentic*, personal fashions.

Teacher Response-ability

Yet it is the teacher's responsibility to create such an energized environment. What are some elements which differentiate teachers and technicians? Primarily, *response-ability;* a *three-dimensional* human being, able and willing to reveal himself as such—fallible yes, but with the perspective of humor. As the teacher, so are the children.

Mrs. M. leaves her room for a moment while her sixth graders are working with clay. Returning, she finds youngsters throwing clay, some at a globe. Furious,

[1]Resonance is a complex factor: Questions passing through minds may cause their extant ideas to form new patterns, and, if so, could constitute resonance.
See "resonance" p. 336. A. Spitz and F. Gaynor, *Dictionary of Astronomy and Astronautics.* New York: Philosophical Library, 1959. Also: E. Hausman and E. P. Slack, *Physics.* New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1948. p. 466, 555, 633.

she "lets them have it,"—then stops to question: "What's clay for? Why were you using it that way?" One of the (throwing) students replies: "I was building mountains." Even in this destructive situation, concepts garnered that year are manifested! Teacher and students "break up," laughing.

Teacher responds with appropriate gratification for the humor and engages them in a fine discussion on the determination of fit uses for materials for particular modes of expression. Later, in retrospect, perspective derived from this sudden, special humor, evoked some excellent cartoons: conversion of art energy! The required breadth, depth, and experience of knowledge for producing such a situation is not found in technical manuals. What, then, would a technician have done? Would there have been the range of knowledge essential for human flexibility to allow for tacking maneuvers?

Teacher response-ability includes the power to encourage seeing one's self refracted by "significant others," as in the following instances: (a) When Jed exercises his right to state: "Those discussions we have—they're okay. But when *you* go on to talk for forty-five minutes, it gets awfully boring. Twenty minutes would be plenty." (b) When Mr. S.[2] asks his high school English class to write constructively about teaching and receives the following response:

> What I think about Mr. S. is that he uses too many big words and being that I come to school to learn—if I don't understand the words the teacher says—I don't know what he's talking about. Also Mr. S. has a bad habit of walking back and forth at the front of the room. I am a sick boy and this walking back and forth makes me nervous. And I'm nervous enough already.

The content in such English classes shifts dramatically from prosaic to poetic.

These incisive student responses are telling blows. Yet such criticism assesses both strength and weakness, cogently conducive to improving the content and process of classroom interaction *for all.* Can we "take it"—and respond with integrity? A questioning, of what was formerly considered our "unalienable right" to be infallible, drags us from "heaven," evicts us from towers, and even exposes clay feet. Our responses to such criticism determine if we are technicians—or, teachers.

The Act of Asking

The listening ear and the observing eye *question* because there is much to discover. It is interesting that, though questioning is the single, most crucial teaching strategy for classroom interaction,[3] Marie Hughes [4] and Ned Flanders [5] have

[2] Contributed by Mr. D. Slotkin, New York City Public High School.

[3] Arno A. Bellack and Associates. *The Language of the Classroom: Part I.* New York: Institute of Psychological Research, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1963.
Also: B. O. Smith and Milton O. Meux. *A Study of the Logic of Teaching.* Urbana, Illinois: Bureau of Educational Research, College of Education, University of Illinois, 1963.

[4] Marie M. Hughes and Associates. *Development of the Means for the Assessment of the Quality of Teaching in Elementary Schools.* Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1959.

[5] Ned A. Flanders. *Helping Teachers Change Their Behavior.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan School of Education, 1963.

found that teacher recognition of, and response-reaction to, student respondents are practically nil. We seem prone to remain out of tune—out of resonance—with our students.

The *quality of questioning* is a next single most vital element for successful teaching. Asking productive, invitational questions is far from an easy task. It takes a treasure of trenchant knowledge (and a special courage) to ask *real* questions—to which teachers have yet to find answers. If I ask a question having one (and only one) possible, known answer, I am, at best, but testing a student's store of fact. *I* know the answer; *he* is expected to know *the* answer.

Granted, such testing is occasionally necessary; still, these are synthetic, not *real* questions—for teacher or student. Real questions make *discovery* possible. A skill possessed by the teacher is an ability to ask questions and variously to respond to any reply—but especially the unanticipated.

Productive Questions: A Tool for Assessment

Evocative questions inviting students to reveal their thoughts, their feelings, their responses-in-action: their authentic selves—enable us to assess the longs and shorts of their knowledge; their abilities to conceptualize, so necessary for adequate coping with, and participating effectively in this world. How much "teaching" do we do with what children already know? [6]

On the other hand, too often we take for granted a store of student knowledge without sufficient evidence. We operate with many unquestioned assumptions . . . So? Let's question!

Productive questioning makes for productive teaching. Cue students to action via question patterns: reveal the meanings *they* have gleaned from *their* interactions with *their* environments. We all possess meanings. Clue them to possible threads from their own backgrounds, which they might braid, twist, pull together, as relevant to ideas-in-exploration. There are no right or wrong answers to such questions: "What does this poem *mean* (say) *to you?*"; "What do *you think* . . .?"; these are "focused, yet open-ended questions." [7]

Such questions can have no predetermined response. Content meaning is prior to form analysis. Out of shared diversity of meanings is content expanded, deepened and enhanced. Public (universal) meanings derive from a multiplicity of meanings privately explored. Each accommodates and assimilates data in his own peculiar manner. Unique cognitive styles and modes of organization are revealed, respected and flourish.

No *teacher* would respond as did a "technician" (observed in a high school history class while listening to a student's report):

Teacher: Mike, why aren't you taking notes?

Mike: Well, I have to hear some more of what he's saying so I'll know what to put down.

[6] George Manolakes, New York University, has collected a significant quantity of data, indicating that, in the teaching of spelling, we do "teach" what children already know.

[7] Hilda Taba. *Thinking in Elementary School Children*. San Francisco: San Francisco State College, 1964.

Teacher (pointing a finger to underscore his command): Everybody else can and is taking notes. You take notes. Now!

As teaching proceeds, the successful teacher picks up such cues and clues for further questions. For now questions are raised which goad students to seek specificity: hard evidence for supporting *their* meanings—to define, to explain, to clarify, to smelt the ores of *their own thinking*. Dialogue ebbs and flows and involves at least two interlocutors: teacher with student(s) and/or student(s) with teacher *and peer(s) with peer(s)*. Students and teacher are "in" on search for, and discovery of ideas which contribute a sense of increasing adequacy for sensing, responding to, and organizing the stuff of an ever-expanding world, each aspect of which becomes ever more relevant.

Providing for Diversity

The key to teaching success is educating for, and through diversity—of feeling, thought and action. It takes indifference to be a technician, but a good bit of *courage* to teach. You can't "play it safe" in a world whose constant is struggle, and whose variables are infinite. To provide for diversity means educational opportunities for each to latch onto whatever ideas in his own way. We seem to believe that acknowledging individual differences must imply only the one-to-one, teacher-student relationship. The possibility aside, is this desirable for classroom interaction? I call for a shift of perspective if we would not train, but teach. Focus for significant ("full of import"; "suggesting or containing some covert or special meaning"—Webster) ideas could draw almost all students into actions seeking their own meanings. But this requires that we acknowledge they (as we) all possess some vital stuff for the content of our classrooms, regardless of socio-economic, ethnic, racial, or religious backgrounds. Shared perceptions shift the perceptions of all—with relevance extended through patterns of *teacher* questions.

A sixth grade class in Harlem, student population "homogeneously" grouped by virtue of I.Q. and reading achievement, constituted the lowest on that grade level. They were described, indifferently, as children who could not think abstractly. One teacher, however, questioned the latent assumptions of such grouping by exploring with them, some mathematical ideas of our number system (in particular), and the history of numbers (in general). Would there were space here to record those discussions! That class made up their *own* number systems, utilizing all kinds of symbols. Sooner or later, more than half the group discovered that, by using something akin to our zero, they need not repeat their symbols in long drawn-out representations! Could we get better evidence of ability to abstract? In one of the windup sessions, a young man asked: "When did men finish making up numbers?" "They haven't finished," came the reply. The look should have been photographed! He delivered his reward, a look of wonder, awe and delight, the reward for being in resonance with students.

Copyright © 1966 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.