Subject Matter with a Focus on Values

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HOW increasingly irrelevant the schools seem! Social conflicts range all around us and the schools (the universities, too) go trotting down their "bland" alleys and continue to devote teaching time to grammar drills, the founding of Jamestown, and the urgent problem of how tall the flag pole is if its shadow is fifty feet at high noon.

If only we could see that the confrontation of high noon is here now, and if any drills are in order, perhaps they ought to be riot drills. If we must measure shadows, let them be the shadows of de facto segregation which cloud our land.

Of course this is not easy. Almost all of us feel tremendous ambivalence as we wrestle with that question of just how much of the standard subject matter of the school is to be set aside to make room for dealing with the current concerns of our society. We can all too quickly cite the fact that these problems are not the school's fault, and that they are too big, too all-encompassing to be tackled in school anyhow. Or we say we have other obligations, like teaching our students the inheritance of man's intellectual past.

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What a school budgets time and money for, however, tell what it prizes. What and who it rewards tell what it cherishes. What the school asks on its true and false questions says more than almost anything else what it cares about, and just now, with the heavy emphasis upon college entrance, the schools care most deeply about putting in more subject matter.

We are not going into that weary either/or argument about subject matter *or* play-play-play. We have nothing against subject matter, per se. We do have an urgent need, however, to make subject matter more relevant, and to us, relevancy means that the subject matter *must* illumine a student's values. Louis Raths puts it this way: "The function of information is to inform. To inform what? To inform our values."

Three Levels

Information which stays merely at the level of filling in the holes of a crossword puzzle, or name-dropping at a suburban cocktail party is information which we really do not need. So much of schooling is at this facts-for-facts level. There is a second level, a higher level, engagingly presented by Bruner, and this is called the concept level. We believe that there is still a higher level, a level which makes use of facts and con-

cepts, but which goes well beyond them in the direction of penetrating a student's life. This we call the *values level.*

Let us look at an example to make this point. Take the favorite social studies topic, "The United States Constitution." We can teach this at the fact level, the concept level, or the values level.

I. *Fact Level* (U. S. Constitution)

1. Information about where and when the Constitution was drawn up

2. Who was involved and which colonies wanted what in it

3. Information about how it differed from the Articles of Confederation

4. Data on what was in the preamble and perhaps asking the class to memorize it

5. A list of the first 10 amendments and why they were called the Bill of Rights

6. The order in which the colonies ratified the document.

The above items should be fairly familiar facts to most of us, although we have probably forgotten the specifics. At one time this topic was presented to us in an organized manner, each fact building upon fact. Unfortunately, it was difficult to remember then and it still is hard to retain. It was of interest to only a few students and of little use even to them in any relevant search for values which might enlighten living in today's world.

Thus, many teachers tried to teach the Constitution at the *concept* level, encouraged by Bruner and his followers.

II. *Concept Level* (U. S. Constitution)

1. Our Constitution as a landmark in the evolving concept of democratic forms of government

2. The concept of "compromise" and how it operated in reconciling the economic forces of the period

3. The motives of the signers and the constituencies all representatives are obligated to serve

4. The social injustices which the Bill of Rights attempted to correct

5. The concept of amendment and how it has operated in state legislatures and in Congress

6. The Constitution today as seen in the actions of the Supreme Court and the American Civil Liberties Union, etc.

The above "subject matter" will be seen as the basis for good teaching. It attempts to build relationships between random facts and to pull together generalizations supported by data. Many educators would be proud to have this kind of teaching going on in their schools, but we would argue that this approach is simply not good enough for these complex times. Let us look now at the *values* level, that third level to which subject matter needs to be lifted.

III. *Values Level* (U. S. Constitution)

1. What rights and guarantees do you have in your family? Who serves as the Supreme Court in disputes?

2. Have you ever written a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine?

3. Many student governments are really token governments controlled by the "mother country," i.e., the administration. Is this true in your school? What can you do about it? If not you, who should do it?

4. Should the editorial board of your school newspaper have the final say about what is printed in it? How do you reconcile the fact that the community will judge the school, a tax supported institution, by what is printed in the school paper?

5. When was the last time you signed a petition? Have you ever been the person to draw one up? What did the last sign you carried on a picket line say?

6. Where do you stand on wire tapping, financial aid to parochial schools, censorship of pornographic magazines, or the right of a barber to decide if he wants to cut a Negro's hair?

This kind of teaching is not for the faint-hearted. It often hits at the guts, but if we are to see the school as more than a place from which we issue the press release each spring which tells which colleges our students made, then we must do more teaching at this third level, this values level.

Let us be clear that teachers are not to

throw out facts and concepts. Obviously, these are essential if we are to have anything to base our values upon. On the other hand, let us say forcefully that Levels I and II, no matter how brilliantly taught, do not clarify students' values. That third level has to be consciously and consistently pushed.

To Inform Our Values

Here is another example to argue for our third level point of view. Take Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It is a good example for three reasons. It is taught universally, it is universally taught badly, and it is a play particularly ripe with values-teaching possibilities.

I. *Fact Level (Hamlet)*

1. Information on the year the play was written, and the sequence it occupies in Shakespeare's works

2. What country did Rosencranz and Guildenstern come from?

3. How did Hamlet's father die? How do we know that?

4. What is the relationship between Hamlet and Queen Gertrude? Between Hamlet and Polonius? And Ophelia?

5. Identify these quotations and explain why Shakespeare put them in the play

6. What is Hamlet's tragic flaw?

7. Who are all the people dead at the end of the play?

The above list is not meant to be all-inclusive by any means. Many other facts and details would be stressed by different teachers. Most teachers, however, feel at ease with such material. Students have been trained to feel comfortable with it, too. They know how to give the teacher what he wants on the kinds of questions which will be asked on tests. (True or False: Ophelia died from an overdose of rosemary?)

Teachers who are more aware will more often be teaching at the second level, the concept level.

II. *Concept Level (Hamlet)*

1. The concept of tragedy as opposed to comedy and how Shakespeare departed from the Aristotelian concepts of drama

2. To understand the various thematic threads of: incest, indecision, revenge, etc.

3. To know the dramaturgy behind the "play within a play" concept

4. The concept of "ghost" as it was understood by an Elizabethan audience

5. Psychological concepts which motivate Hamlet, Gertrude, Laertes, etc.

6. The various ways *Hamlet* has been played by the great Shakespearean actors.

Again, our lists are merely suggestive. It should, however, be quite apparent that this kind of teaching is much more lively and meaningful as compared with the survey of routine facts or going over the play line for line. Nevertheless, it is a serious error *not* to take your teaching to that third level, the values level. *Hamlet* is so very well-suited to help students develop the skills of clarifying their values and evaluating their lives. We believe that questions like the ones below should help students to do this.

III. *Values Level (Hamlet)*

1. King Claudius supposedly killed to get ahead. How far will you go to get what you want?

2. Laertes hears his father's advice, and it comes out a string of clichés. What kind of advice do you get which falls on *your* deaf ears?

3. Part of *Hamlet* is about the obligation of a son to seek revenge for his father. Where do you stand on that kind of act?

4. Hamlet is cruel to Ophelia. In what ways have you ever been cruel to members of the opposite sex? When have you been the recipient? Is cruelty an essential part of love to you?

5. What are some things about which you are having trouble making up your mind? Where will you go for help? Whom do you trust? How will you know that you have made a wise decision?

6. What kind of son or daughter do you want to be?

7. Death is a regular happening in *Hamlet*. How close have you ever come to death? What part of you responds to a news story of death on the highway, death in Vietnam?

It might be well to take a look at the third level, the values level, questions posed

here. For one thing, the questions have a heavy component of "you" in them. Among these "you" questions there are some which invite a student to examine alternatives and to follow out the consequences. Some search for elements of pride in his choices. All of them, hopefully, cause him to look more closely at his present life, to see it as related to the subject matter he is studying. Some of the alternatives show that the subject matter could be pertinent to his personal existence. This is essential, this linking of the facts and concepts to the choices and decisions in the student's real life, at least if we are serious about teaching for the clarification of values.[1]

Among these "you" questions there are several which get the student to look at what he is actually *doing* in his life. The questions about the United States Constitution at the third level illustrate this clearly. This action emphasis is very important in the search for values. Many of the social conflicts of our time rage on because so many of us have a giant gap between what we "say" and what we "do." For many of us this gap is a chasm.

These are troubled and confused times in which to grow up. To live life with integrity becomes more and more difficult for more and more people. The threads of alienation which are increasingly woven into our youth must give us all deep concern.

We must demand of the subject matter we teach that it make us more than politely erudite. We must insist that it relate to students' lives. It must pertain to the realities of life in this complex and confusing time. Subject matter which is lifted to that third level, that values level, will give us a fighting chance. We must not be guilty of ignoring Dag Hammarskjold's warning: "In modern times we are in danger of taking facts for knowledge, and knowledge for wisdom." □

[1] For more on the values theory which supports this article, see: Louis E. Raths, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney B. Simon. *Values and Teaching*. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc., 1966.

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