Working from Within

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SO MUCH is being written these days about the need for more humane schools. Yet this often turns out to be largely rhetoric because we have few clear-cut pictures of what a more humane classroom is like. Professional literature continues to be caught up in the technological language of behavioral goals and learning packages.

In effect, there is a shortage of what might be called "conceptual tools" for translating into action what educators such as Alexander Frazier and Louise Berman tend to call the "larger learnings." What, for example, does the authentic teacher do? How does one go about adequate preactive planning? Indeed, is it possible to do such planning?

To help myself understand these kinds of questions, I have examined some of my own classroom operations. I did this as I taught English for the past two years at the Paul D. Schreiber High School in Port Washington, New York. This analysis helped me to see and to rationalize more fully what I was doing. Moreover, it raised some fresh questions about the nature of planning in the preactive realm and the development of appropriate teaching strategies when I moved into interaction with students. What follows here is a report of this effort. It seems to me to throw new light on such matters as general methods, lesson planning, and a redefinition of the role of the teacher.

Jackson Pollock's talk about his work is very helpful. It underscores A. H. Maslow's advice that we turn to the performing arts for insight into more adequate views of teaching.

Painting as a Model

In a 1950 interview,[1] Pollock was asked: "Then you don't actually have a preconceived image of a canvas in your mind?" He replied: "Well, not exactly—no—because it hasn't been created, you see. Something new—it's quite different from working, say, from a still life where you set up objects and work directly from them. I do have a general notion of what I'm about and what the results will be." The interviewer continued: "That does away, entirely, with all preliminary sketches?" Pollock replied: "Yes, I approach painting in the same sense as one approaches drawing, . . . I don't make sketches . . . into a final painting. Painting, I think, today—the more immediate, the more direct—the greater the possibilities of making a direct—of making a statement."

One way I view teaching is similar to the way Pollock approached painting. Regularly I walk into class without a preconceived

[1] From: "An Interview with Jackson Pollock," taped by William Wright in 1950 and first published in *Jackson Pollock* by Francis V. O'Connor. © 1967 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

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lesson plan. Although I have a general notion of what I am up to, I make no preliminary sketches.

This past year, for example, in a 10-week introductory course on Existentialism I taught as part of a senior elective program, I walked in, sat at a student desk, and asked if there were any comments or questions concerning the film we had viewed the day before. There were, and some time was spent in exchanging observations, questioning each other's conclusions, and wondering aloud about the film's symbolic import.

Finally, some moments of silence persuaded me that no one had anything more to say about the film. I began reading from Kierkegaard's *Either*, but interrupted myself soon after to ask for comments, of which there were many. We did some textual analysis, but primarily students explained how a particular passage affected them, what it meant to them personally. One such explanation intrigued me; I responded, referring to my biography to concur with the student. In the remaining time, various individuals responded to that particular point, and to each other, most disclosing elements of their biographies in doing so.

Prefigurative Content

Margaret Mead has urged that we learn to use the existential knowledge of the young in what she calls the prefigurative realm. What does such a commitment mean for the teacher? How are we to translate this into teaching operations?

For me, in a course in American and English fiction for high school juniors, it meant that I walked into the room and, first of all, *listened* to their talk. Among the numerous conversations, I heard a student describing what he termed the senselessness of his parents' lives. They arose at 5:30: father to catch a 7:15 train to New York, mother to prepare breakfast for him, then to awaken the children for school.

During this description, other students stopped their talk and began to listen to the speaker. As he finished his account of a typical working day at his house, another responded by giving a brief but similar description. Most of the class was involved in the discussion, some marveling over the grueling ritual of adult life, others expressing contempt that their parents would choose to lead such lives.

I intervened at this point. We had been reading Thoreau's *Walden*, and I quoted from it. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." I asked if Thoreau might legitimately make such an observation now, 100 years later. Most believed he might. Thinking associatively, I suppose, a student wondered aloud if that might be one criterion of fine writing: It rang as true now as it did when it was written. Discussion ensued. Books we had read earlier in the year were mentioned, either to contradict or corroborate the hypothesis. As the bell rang ending the period, we were discussing what life in Thoreau's America must have been like to prompt him to make such a disquieting observation.

These two examples are illustrative of

the way I often teach classes. I have knowledge of my discipline, some knowledge of my students, and some self-knowledge which I am willing to share. As well, I come ready to respond, not only as a student and teacher of literature, but as a person. In fact, I must be willing to disclose my thoughts and feelings if I am to hope for similar disclosures from students. I must be willing to explain, at times I intuit as "right," how and why a certain literary piece affects me. I must be so willing if I am to hope that the discipline that is significant for me will also be significant for my students. So, although I make no preliminary sketch, that is, a lesson plan outlining material to be covered, "I do have a general notion of what I'm about and what the results will be."

I think there is value to this approach. As Pollock remarked in regard to his painting, it is direct. I "be" with my students in a direct way; there is no lesson or sense of authority to make our conversing indirect; as a result, we often make cognitive and emotive contact. The class becomes more immediate; we tend to become immersed in the moment. I find that students tend to speak what they are thinking and feeling at the moment, and they come to make honest, direct statements—to each other and to me. I sense, and many have explicitly reinforced my belief, that most feel no pressure, however subtle, to say things that they think I might like to hear.

Working from Within

Returning to the Pollock interview helps me further explain why I value this approach more than other alternate strategies.

At one point, the interviewer asked: "Mr. Pollock, the classical artists had a world to express and they did so by representing the objects in that world. Why doesn't the modern artist do the same thing?" Pollock replied: "Hm—the modern artist is living in a mechanical age and we have a mechanical means of representing objects in nature such as the camera and photograph. The modern artist, it seems to me, is working and expressing an inner world—in other words—expressing the energy, the motion, and other inner forces." From another section of the interview Pollock reiterates: "The thing that interests me is that today painters do not have to go to a subject matter outside of themselves. Most modern painters work from a different source. They work from within."

We teachers have the mechanical means to present the material we deem important to present. Many approaches are open to us. I often do it by simply typing on stencils whatever I judge might be helpful in explaining the literature we read. Each student receives a copy of this information, and he is free to peruse it at his convenience. Class time is freed and I can work to create an atmosphere in which students feel free to express, in Pollock's phrase, their "inner worlds." Like some modern painters, my students and I have come to feel that we rarely need to go to subject matter outside ourselves. We work from a different source. We work from within.

I am suggesting here that working from within involves a set of teaching strategies that may help us bridge the gap between our rhetoric about more humane schools and classroom realities. □

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