Reprinted for private circulation from
JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION, Vol. XXVII, No. 2, February, 1956

The Convenient Assumption

By HOWARD STEIN

Some Critical Comments on College Teaching

IN HIS article entitled "Education for All Is Education for None," Douglas Bush proposed a series of questions. ". . . what is it in our educational process or in our culture at large that so often causes a liberal education to end on commencement day? Why do so many undergraduates become alumni? Why does starry-eyed youth lapse into flabby, middle-aged vacuity, into the Helen Hokinson wife and her husband?"[1] To these judgmental queries Mr. Bush offers suggestions of "varying importance," suggestions directed to the administration departments of our universities, counseling care in admissions, care in devising a curriculum, and caution in the attitude toward the Ph.D. waiver. When I first read the article, I was overjoyed in reading an articulate opinion about "the standards" established in American universities. On the second reading, however, my enthusiasm was tempered by Mr. Bush's failure to discuss the rôle of the teacher in a consideration of the problem of "standards." "Middle-aged vacuity," it seems to me, cannot be blamed so slickly upon the administration policies of the colleges, nor on the concept of "education for all is education for none." Students are too often exposed to suffer the slings and arrows of "middle-aged vacuity" before commencement, not after it. It may be useful, therefore, to inspect the rôle of the teacher and the importance of his attitudes in order to understand the "how" and "why" of these "standards."

When I first applied for a position as a university instructor, I was told by the head of the Humanities Department that "80 per cent of these students should not be here. They don't want to learn. . . . All they want is a wife or husband, a house, a jalopy, and a television set. Maybe one or two are really interested." I was violent in my disagreement with this authority, not only because of my youth and my ignorance of the situation, but because I believed Aristotle's statement that it is natural for Man to want to know. Despite my confidence, I was quickly dismissed with the smile and slick slogans of the weary, "You expect too much of people. They don't have it. You're going to be disappointed!" These same stale words had been cast at my feet just two years earlier by a more famous name at the same university and under the very same conditions. I left thinking it was a local disease.

Soon after, however, I began teaching in a university, and I discovered it was not a local disease at all. On

[1] *New York Times Magazine*, January 9, 1955, p. 13.

the contrary, I fear that the geography of this attitude is national and shall not fail! Teachers watch students come to college for a degree, not for knowledge; they observe that they cannot trust the student to do his own work, and even more fundamentally, that they cannot trust the student's ability to learn. From all these observations, the pragmatic truth is concluded, "Students do not want to learn!" Once having realized the truth of this conclusion, the teachers have the habit of converting it into an assumption, the convenient assumption, upon which a great deal of teaching and lecturing in American universities is accomplished today. I am in no less disagreement with the assumption today than I was during my interviews, but I am many times more angry with the immorality of its convenience.

Now this is a hasty, harsh, and terrible accusation I am making, especially in light of the validity of the observations, for it is true that many students do come to college with the one desire to get a degree, not with the desire to learn, that many students do cheat, some do lie, and some even steal, and that many are untrustworthy. I would agree with all the educators who state these observations as real, living, and authentic, but I cannot agree with them in their belief that these observations are the natural expressions of the student. "I did not say it was natural," answers the educator, "I said it was the situation." "If it is not natural," I ask, "then why do you accept its validity?" The answer is invariably the same, "I see it every day. Wait until you've been teaching for twenty years." It is at this point, it seems to me, that the convenient assumption, "students do not want to learn," is most helpful to the teacher, for he can now dismiss his responsibility to the student by a pragmatic judgment of motivation. The results are inevitable, and the question of the teacher is just as inevitable, "Am I supposed to be fighting the whole system?" The answer is simple, "Yes." The method of accomplishing this battle, however, is not so simple.

PERHAPS there is no better method than the constant awareness of the problem and the refusal to deny it. I can offer a suggestion, like Mr. Bush, and that may very well be all that is possible. Since all our activity issues forth from our fundamental assumptions, which we call our philosophy of life, so the teaching of a student springs forth from the instructor's philosophy of education. I wonder what a teacher is trying to effect when the basic premise of his philosophy is that students do not want to learn? Is he searching for the mind of the superior students, those students with the "intellectual talent," or is he trying to reach the whole being of these superior students? What is the purpose of his craft, for teaching is a craft? Perhaps an analogy between the art of teaching and the art of playwriting would make my suggestion clear.

The playwright, like the teacher, also brings an assumption to his trade. He assumes that the people who have come to see his play have paid their money to be entertained, or, more accurately, to be moved. He makes a further assumption, that

anyone who witnesses his play, if it is a good play, will be moved. The playwright does not question the experience of those in his audience, their intellect, their heart, or their attitudes. If he is a good playwright, he appeals to their whole being, to the unity of the individual. And if the play is good, the audience responds to it, each person responding in proportion to the cultivation of his aesthetic sense; and as a result, each person will have been broadened by the experience.

As is the case with all analogies, in application the comparison is only partially valid. I cannot translate the truth of the playwright's situation to that of the teacher's. A teacher is not hired in order to give his students an aesthetic experience. But is not the teacher's relationship to his students similar to that of the playwright to his audience? Does he not have an audience, each member of which brings with him a different cultivation of sensibility, and is he not obligated when lecturing to these students to discover the correct form by which he can appeal to all of them, whether they be the most select or the least discriminating? and Is he not obligated to create lectures and teaching devices which will have meaning to all students no matter what level of cultivation they have reached, and will not each student be moved and extended by something commensurate with the cultivation of his abilities? Should not the teacher, then, be a creative artist like the playwright, as well as an interpretive artist like the actor, so that he moves his students with the subject-matter, whether it be mechanics, German, or Milton? Does he not have to labor over his efforts rather than hide behind the mask that the administration is permitting anyone with warm blood to crowd his classrooms? It is a rather easy and unproductive task, to select the great ideas and present them to a student body of "superior minds" and tell them to do with those ideas what they want. But I wonder how many of these "superior minds" leave college, believing that they have had "good instruction."

My suggestion is that good instruction comes only in those cases when the teacher chooses to act as a creative artist. And just as an artist believes in the form by which he chooses to express himself, so a teacher must believe in the form which he has chosen. He must believe in teaching. Since it is a self-evident truth that classroom instruction occurs as an interaction between the student and the teacher, it logically follows that the teacher's belief in his form will be rooted in the principle that "all students want to learn." For what other reason would he be teaching? The teacher's doubts occur when he discovers the variation in abilities and the attitudes with which the students approach his classroom. Soon he allows his observations to defile his beliefs. The disillusionment is full blown, and the instructor is on guard never to again expose himself to those lazy dullards whose one intention is to avoid work. They will never again make a fool out of him, nor will he ever again take upon himself the monumental task of long, arduous preparation in order to give his students something. "They don't appreciate it," he cries! He has other excuses as well: the administration underpays him, the load is too

heavy, and, most of all, the satisfaction is not commensurate with the effort. All these apparent truths swallow up the initial zeal with which the teacher may have come to work, and soon his excitement has been perfectly dispersed so that his daily life becomes an endless series of nine o'clock classes, the trial of publishing, and the struggle to locate last year's notes.

Practical people will object to what I say. "Am I supposed to keep hitting my head against a wall?" My only answer is one given me by the best teacher I ever had, "Keep on being a 'sucker.'" All teachers have been disappointed in their students. Those who have actively trusted them, I believe, were more disappointed than those who never took the risk. And it makes a teacher angry and bitter to have a student lie about preparation, or cheat on an examination, or fail to learn as swiftly as the instructor would have him. With all this resentment, however, does it follow that the disappointed teacher should meet his next group of students with suspicion? Is this not the logic of all prejudice? Is it possible to create trust from suspicion? Can anything come from nothing?

Society takes unto itself convenient labels whenever the responsibility is put to it to understand a problem. If a man steals, he is labeled a thief or a criminal. If a man tells a falsehood, he is called a liar. If a man kills, except, of course, in times of war, he is called a murderer. Are these labels anything other than conveniences? Are they not simply the license which society gives itself in order to dismiss the necessity to understand such actions? Education attempts to open minds and therefore free them from the convenient tags with which society prefers to clutter them. But this education has to start somewhere, and since in the classroom it is the teacher who is the inciting force, in the classroom it must start with him. He creates the mood and the spirit to which his audience responds, just as does the playwright. And just as it is certain that the love in a house is in the bread on the table, so the trust in a classroom is in the chalk with which the teacher writes.

NOW that I have bludgeoned the teacher, I should like to turn to the other responsible party in the classroom situation, the student. By paying the registrar, the student has bought the right to be exposed to the pursuit of knowledge. With this right, he has bought a responsibility since the means of accomplishing the pursuit is by an interpersonal relationship with the teacher. Whether the teacher be a book or an instructor, the student must participate in an active, vital relationship for anything active and vital to result from it. Now it would seem to me that the vitality of most college students is exhausted in the pursuit of every form of knowledge but that of the classroom. Let us presume, however, that there is still some vitality left over. How is this vitality aroused in order to be free to operate?

I think everyone would agree that some students bring this quality with them, but that the great majority of students do not. There is one thing which all students do bring

with them, however, no matter with what intensity they pursue other forms of knowledge, and that is the desire to be discovered. This means that the student wants to be accepted and respected. A human being most feels himself a human being when he is considered as such by a teacher. At such a time, he feels safe enough to share all those ridiculous notions, ideas, and heartaches which are scattered throughout his being—like a wet wash in a wicker basket. It may not seem so to most teachers, but students yearn to take that confusion piece by piece and hang it upon a line to dry. Because of this, books sometimes become the safest teachers of the young, because they afford the student the license to be free. In the discovery process they even do more. They articulate feelings which have already been experienced by the young student, but which he has not had the ability nor the courage nor the freedom to articulate for himself. What a glorious revelation it is to the student when he reads Omar Khayyam, Kahlil Gibran, and Christina Rossetti, and all the writers with whom we associate the violent years of seventeen to twenty-one. Students feel comfortable in the world of these men. Their world is all worlds, for there is no great idea which is out of joint with Nature, and which has not its roots in the clay and worms of experience. Unfortunately, many students have only what Fritz Radl calls "awkward" methods with which to appeal to their teachers in order to present this desire to be discovered, and often times the sophisticated teacher feels it his duty, since the student has made the giant step to college, to put the student's heart in a frame of mind! Those fortunate enough to have "graceful" methods find discovery, perhaps, more rapidly, because their grace is so much easier to be with.

The contingencies of administrative routines also add their share of problems. It is obvious to all that a teacher cannot hope to discover a student when there are one hundred and sixty in a lecture room. It is highly improbable that he can when he is forced to teach thirty-five. But there are many teachers with small classes who do not make the effort to discover their students. Teachers should not be tape recorders, nor should students be silent listeners: both parties are obligated to participate in the relationship. This demands effort on the student's part, but it demands perception as well as effort on the teacher's. The colleges complain that the students come only for the degree. Yet, a host of schools offer instruction, the sole value of which is that it fulfills the requirements toward graduation. It seems to me that they are the cause of the disease of which they pretend to be the cure. Administrators know it, students know it, and the teachers know it. Perhaps it is time that universities stop complaining about the values that the students bring with them, and begin concerning themselves with the basic values that they are propagating.

BY HIS suggestions, Mr. Bush has made justifiable demands upon the administration, it seems to me, and his suggestions can, in time, be put into operation. My suggestion, on the other hand, seems to be much more impractical; it seems romantic

and naïve, directed to giants and heroes, and implies that I am shoving all the responsibility of the administrators, the students, and society onto the instructor. Actually that is not the case. It seems to me that my suggestion is the most practical of all, because it can be put into operation immediately, since it appeals to the individual instructor, not to the system. All that I have said can be reduced to work and awareness. My suggestion is in the form of an orientation, not a group of specific methods. I would ask the teacher when he is in the classroom to orient himself by his philosophy of education, and to search diligently for the premises or assumptions upon which all his teaching is based. I would ask him to understand his task by starting at the beginning, not in the middle. For example, I wonder if in reading this article, the teachers will ask themselves whether or not they really like students. It seems likely to me that their craving for an answer may well result from the asking of this question. I certainly hope so, because the need for an answer today is very great.