

Human Interaction in Teaching and Learning: A University Approach to Improvement*

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Public education, although beset with criticism from its inception, is in the midst of weathering its most severe storm. One need only note the newspaper headlines for a week to see the myriad of demands being placed upon the schools. On one hand, there is increased demand for productivity—what Talcott Parsons, in his book, *The Social System*, would call instrumental education (education for usefulness)—and on the other, there is the insistence upon strengthening humanism in teaching and learning—again drawing on Talcott Parsons—called expressive education (education for self-fulfillment) (1). It seems clear from the volumes being published that expressive education is receiving prime attention at the moment.

Reliable indications point clearly to the notion that instrumental or utility-based education is relatively secure in this country. Although some would argue that education for productivity is often drawn out and tedious, most would admit that professional schools have been rather successful in equipping their graduates to “get the job done.” Further, upward social mobility in American society has traditionally derived from increased education, hence improved work skills. Although admittedly not fully developed, this aspect of the education of children seems to be of

less pressing importance today than the emotional or expressive content of the learning process. Therefore, the “Educational Establishment” may well consider the charge that the time is ripe for the consideration of a variety of kinds of learning, specifically as they relate to individual development, which may be very tightly, or loosely, or not at all, attached to social mobility and vocational skills.

The intent of this discussion is to describe a limited, though highly intensive, effort which is aimed at equipping the teacher of children with a more complete synthesis of knowledge concerning a child’s physical and psychological growth and development. An important aspect of this effort is enabling the teacher to develop a better understanding of his own personality and its impact on the teaching process. The assumption is that this can be done in a manner that is relatively nonthreatening to the teacher, while allowing him to learn more of the factual aspects inherent in the growth and development of children, as he, at the same time, learns more about himself.

Thus, as the teacher gains sensitivity, appreciation, and respect for his own individual make-up, it should follow that he will be in a more favorable position to provide his students greater latitude for learning and developing into healthy human beings.

If one asks any number of grown-up persons about their memories of the adults in their childhood world, one hears answers with as many variations as the different individuals queried. But among these

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many variations, certain patterns of responses are evident. Those questioned begin to sort out the "good" adults from the "bad," those who had a positive and those who had a negative influence on their lives. Further discussion, however, will often reveal that it is not so easy to sort out the "good" from the "bad," and the same qualities many times will be found to exist in the same person.

For example, an extremely "tough" teacher, who on first encounter frightens a young child, may be redeemed in the eyes of the child by a prevailing attitude of fairness to all. On the other hand, an unwitting teacher who humiliates a young child before his peers may contribute to learning blocks that handicap the child for a long time. As a result, subsequent teachers may be met with apprehensive expectations by the child, or the apprehension may attach to the instructional content, and he may never really come to grips with that particular subject. One humiliating experience, with its accompanying social downfall, may be only temporarily debilitating, but a repetition of such experiences can have a devastating effect on a child's learning as well as on his personality development.

We must ask ourselves whether adult memories of childhood experiences are accurate? Not always. Often they are distorted through a screen of intervening years of living. But there is a remarkable similarity among the ideas of adults about what experiences and accompanying feelings were important to them as children. It is also interesting that these adult-expressed ideas, though more circumstantial and sophisticated in their telling, are often quite similar in content to those expressed by older children not so many years removed from the experiences they are recounting.

Somewhere, somehow, in the neuroanatomy-chemistry-physiology of each individual, these memories of life's experiences are imprinted. Though many of them are apparently forgotten, they no doubt continue to have their individual and collective influences on subsequent attitudes and behavior. Fortunately, human beings are thinking as well as feeling organisms, and hopefully throughout our adult lives we discover things about ourselves that are derived from our early experiences in childhood. Fortunately, too, though physical maturity has been reached, we can modify and change in personality through the process of self-discovery. Adults can, and do, continually realign their personality characteristics through living and increased understanding.

Teachers, like parents, are viewed through many glasses, from rose-colored to bilious green or jaun-

diced yellow. This view is shaped to some extent by the beholder's genetic pool and life experiences, and the interactions of the two. Whatever the specific aspect a particular student takes of a teacher, it is subject to modification and change through experience. The change may occur as a result of an awareness by the student that others do not hold the same view, or the student's perception of the teacher may change through direct experience of interaction with the teacher.

It is recognized that few teachers can be all things to all students, and certainly the goal should not be the winning of a popularity poll. If popularity exists, should it not be a by-product of something more important, that is, ability as a teacher? It is generally taken for granted that familiarity with and relative mastery of subject matter is one primary requirement of an effective teacher. In an era of instant knowledge and pseudo-wisdom, this position may be questioned. But at least a teacher, it would seem to some, should have something to teach.

Given a teacher with something to teach, the real challenge becomes the student to be taught. What does the student bring to the learning situation? Each child, though similar to other children, is different, with his own individual style. Yet, parents, taxpayers, students, teachers, professors, and administrators are continually alleging through every media available, that educational programming too often approaches all students as if they were being uniformly processed by a one-product factory, with unwavering specifications for that product.

Everyone can cite individual instances in which such an accusation is unwarranted; any individual can name several teachers, in his own school career, and that of his children, who have approached their teaching tasks as if each student were, truly, singular. Such teachers have been able to assess fairly accurately each person in the class as to emotional temperament as well as to intellectual abilities, to identify the style of learning peculiar to each, and to teach in such a way as to encourage each in his own optimal development as an individual and a responsible member of society.

Traditionally, pedagogy has been manifestly concerned with cognitive function, though with notable exceptions among spokesmen for education, such as John Dewey. Increasingly, however, educators have become more aware of and concerned with and have learned more about, the mentally retarded child, the child with hampering emotional problems, the child with severe learning disabilities, and the disadvantaged child, among other groupings. As a

natural consequence of this concern with children who are not efficient learners in the traditional sense, education has become less purely cognitive and more and more holistic. Such concern has had its greatest expression in regard to those children mentioned above, who are identifiable as requiring special teaching in the attempt to provide them with an optimal educational experience. As a result of this, courses in teacher preparation have multiplied, devoting many hours to study of the characteristics and the methods of teaching a particular group of children. Yet, this has not significantly improved the approach to that large group of normally achieving children who do not carry a specific diagnosis, yet urgently need a modified educational program. These children, approximately 85% of the school population, are the real subjects of this discussion. Education courses have provided the young inexperienced teacher with valuable information. Yet, too often, despite such intensive preparation in curriculum and methodology, the teacher who is on the firing line with his special charges, professes to be too ignorant of the feelings and emotions of his students, and pleads for help from any source to aid him in understanding them.

Perhaps there is no course preparation for a complete understanding of the affective component of education. An open mind with a desire to learn and a rich life experience are no doubt essential factors, and probably this is how most teachers and others have acquired some wisdom to accompany their knowledge. Despite the lack of specificity as to how to accomplish such a goal, the authors of this article have been concerned with trying to give young teachers a broader base for understanding themselves and their students, and have devoted efforts toward this end over the past decade.

Proceeding from the above stated rationale, it was decided to develop a course which would create the opportunity for better understanding by teachers of children's affective as well as cognitive patterns of development. Also, it was assumed that the teacher or prospective teacher participants would gain increased self-perception. Therefore, Human Interaction in Teaching-Learning, a three-hour semester course for three credits was offered.

Throughout the years, the format has been varied, depending on the composition of the group; and many individual projects and assignments have been modified to meet the needs of particular students.

The classes have met one night each week for three hours for a full semester. Initially intended for Special Education students, it early became apparent

that the course would and should fill a general, rather than a specific need; therefore, it has not been limited to those majoring in Special Education or even education. While each class will typically have a preponderance of students from education, others majoring in fields such as psychology, science, rehabilitation counseling, art education, and sociology also have been represented. At first the size of the class was limited to ten or twelve students, but increased demand has necessitated a larger group. Currently, the class is limited to thirty students. Beyond this, the size of the group begins to preclude optimal class participation. Ages vary from the young college student to the middle-aged woman or man who has returned to work on either a baccalaureate or graduate degree. The background of student experience varies from those with no teaching experience to the person who has taught for many years. Either undergraduate or graduate credit is permitted, although the requirements differ somewhat for the two groups.

The basic content of the course is aimed at providing the students with a better understanding of total human development from the newborn period through adolescence. The stages of development, though somewhat empirical in their divisions, are approached in sequence with delineation of the accomplishments that need to take place during these phases. An attempt is made to integrate comprehension of the biological and psychological aspects, stressing the perceptions and feelings that children develop in the course of their life experiences, as well as their reactions to these experiences.

In most of the classes, no specific text has been used, but rather, selected readings. Students present summations of these readings and lead discussions focused around the material presented. Thus, the entire class, with its diverse backgrounds and myriad of experiences serves both as a resource and course content, bringing a wealth of experience to bear on any particular aspect of the material under discussion. The effect is a wholesome introduction of theory and practice, often resulting in much consensual validation. If the idea is new and fresh for a particular student, he has the advantage of hearing of some everyday practical experiences to which he can relate the theory.

Suitable audio-visual material is used to extend the material presented by students. For example, movies on growth and development such as neuromuscular skills at different ages, social interaction in children's play, the effects of early deprivation, and cultural patterns of child rearing have been used. In addition, these groups have had the advantage of

meeting at the Virginia Treatment Center for Children, a children's psychiatric hospital operated by the Commonwealth of Virginia. The setting has permitted the use of applicable video-taped material from the extensive library of case histories available at this institution. Such data from "live" cases have served to give an immediacy to the material and to portray graphically the results of maladaptation of children whose growth and development may have been thwarted for any of a multitude of reasons.

Some of these cases are very complicated, and ensuing discussion makes clearer to the student that often there are few simplistic answers. This is considered to be of value inasmuch as many of these students enter the class with an attitude of "give me a method" for dealing in the classroom with a particular problem. Thus, their thinking is directed toward trying to understand motivations and causes underlying behavior. One student expressed it this way; "As I understand more about children's behavior, I find myself automatically developing more effective methods in my class. I no longer think of every piece of behavior as 'good' or 'bad,' 'disruptive' or 'non-disruptive.'"

A third aspect of an evening's class work is the collection of observations which the students have brought from the previous week. These are in the form of a short sketch from two to four written or typed pages. Generally the observations are of two kinds:

1. *Direct observation of children.* Students may be asked to observe for fifteen to thirty minutes and simply put down what they see—newborn babies in a nursery, two-year olds at play, a mixture of all ages on a public playground, a group of junior high school girls, children in a doctor's waiting room, children attending a presentation of the youth symphony, and many others.

With participants from throughout the metropolitan area, as well as surrounding rural areas, the observations are made in many locations; and the exchange of information and discussions are both enlightening and entertaining.

2. *Recall from students' own childhood.* These short sketches are done as out-of-class assignments and include, among others, such titles as: A Childhood Discovery, A First Day at School, A Childhood Fear, A Big Failure, A Whopping Success, A Childhood Illness, My Least Favorite Teacher, My Favorite Teacher. The direct observations are presented by the

students, and the instructor reads, anonymously, some of the personal sketches.

Both of these exercises never fail to elicit great enthusiasm and discussion with further spontaneous recall. Questions are generated, and the exchange and sharing of ideas narrows the gap, we believe, between philosophy and practice of the educational process. Often, the presentation of observations and sketches takes place during the third hour of the three-hour session. Frequently the level of spirit, participation, and interest is so high that the group wants to continue long past the established closing time.

By dividing the course content into these three segments—student presentation of reading with discussion; movies and/or video-tape presentations; and observations and childhood-recall sketches—a kind of diversity is afforded which appears to be one factor in sustaining interest and enthusiasm over the three-hour class session. Also, a short refreshment break twice during the evening permits students to move around and continue to exchange ideas even more informally, an important consideration for students whether they be seven or seventy.

With the interaction and participation that has resulted from these teaching encounters, we have the distinct impression that examinations are unnecessary. Certainly they are unnecessary from the point of view of the instructor, as there is ample opportunity to observe the student involved in the learning process and for both student and instructor to have a clear understanding of the progress that is being made. In addition to the instructor's evaluation of students, there is also a continuous student-instructor evaluation of the content and method of the course which results in suggested changes being implemented each semester.

Student response has been encouraging, and almost without exception has taken a very positive tone. The following unsolicited comments are typical of many that have been made directly and indirectly over the years: From a psychology (senior) undergraduate major: "This experience has made psychology come alive for me. It has given form and function to all the theory I have been reading and hearing these past four years. I have already recommended it to several of my classmates." A graduate student who had taught elementary school for several years: "This is one of the best classes I have ever had—graduate or undergraduate. I was totally involved." Another teacher: "I really looked forward to each week, and the thing I liked most was the willingness of everyone to share ideas and experiences and to be of help to each other."

An undergraduate senior later wrote a letter: "That class somehow gave me a confidence in myself and my own ideas that I though I'd never have. I was worried all year about even applying for a teaching job, and the thought of interviews petrified me. Somewhere toward the end of the class, I realized that the fear was gone. I believe it was the increased understanding of myself and other people that resulted from the interactions in that class. At any rate, my interviews went well, and I accepted the job I really wanted but was sure I wouldn't be offered. As a matter of fact, each interview resulted in a job offer."

An undergraduate involved in practice teaching: "The material about latency-aged children has been of great help. Just last week I was able to help another teacher who was quite upset when she saw two eight-year-old boys holding hands on the way to the playground. She wanted to intervene and reprimand them for something which she saw as quite flagrant. I said that I thought we should just be aware of it, that at their age it probably didn't mean they were 'abnormal,' and that they probably wouldn't continue the behavior. This is just what has happened. They are good friends and playing like all the

other children. This may be a minor matter, but I felt that it would have done the boys no good to have their passing behavior interpreted as 'abnormal' by an extremely anxious teacher."

An undergraduate: "I have learned a lot about writing and expressing myself in this class. When I'm dealing with ideas and observations where punctuation and syntax don't matter, writing becomes a pleasure. Then these technical details tend to take care of themselves."

And one final observation from an experienced teacher. A year or two later she met one of the instructors on the street and said, "I think about that class often and talk about it to my friends. When they ask what I learned, I can't give them a single, solitary fact. But I always tell them that ever since then I have felt better about myself and the children I teach."

This last response is one that we value most of all.

REFERENCE

PARSONS, TALCOTT. *The Social System*. New York, Free Press, 1951, p. 76.