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Exploring My Teaching

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Exploring My Teaching

I POSSESS in good measure the impulse to nail down the truth about teaching once and for all, and on that basis to tell everyone else how to teach. Much in this essay hovers on the brink of being plain, pushy, normative advice. Nevertheless, the main thing I've come to believe through the exploration described here—and the main thing I wish to stress—is that better teaching behavior comes primarily from exploring one's *own* teaching from on experiential and phenomenological point of view: "What did I actually do? What was I actually experiencing when I did it? Can I say what feelings, ideas, or experiences led me to do it?" This approach leads to very different teaching behaviors for different people and even different teaching behaviors for the same person at different times. All these behaviors will indeed be "right," I would say, so long as they rest upon a symmetrical premise: an equal affirmation of the *student's* experience, his right to ground his behaviors in his experience, and thus his right, like the teacher's, to embark on his own voyage of change, development, and growth as to what is right for him:

I am not in this world to live up to your expectations

Peter Elbow teaches Humanities at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This article is based on a speech given at the annual meeting of NCTE in 1969, and an abbreviated version of it appeared in Change (Jan. 1971).

And you are not in this world to live up to mine. (Fritz Perls)

After five years of regular college teaching—trying to be Socrates and a good guy at the same time—and after three years of nonteaching while I was finishing my Ph.D. but thinking a lot about teaching (see *College English*, Vol. 30, Nos. 2 and 3), I reentered the classroom to discover an unexpected set of reactions. I found I couldn't stand to tell students things they hadn't asked me to tell them. I knew I knew things that were both true and important, but that only made me feel all the more gagged and mute. I even found I couldn't stand to ask questions—except the question, "What is your question?" Nothing seemed worth saying in a classroom till a student had a question he took seriously. I was no longer willing to listen to the thud of my question lying dead on the classroom floor. I refused to coax interest. I also felt it as a refusal to pedal alone. If they won't pedal, neither will I. No source of energy seemed bearable except their motivation. And not only motivation but experience. If they are not talking from the experience of the text read—even the felt experience of getting no experience from it—then count me out.

These were troublesome feelings. Giving in to them seemed to mean abdicating my role as a teacher. But they wouldn't go away and I was feeling ornery. So

with respect to most of the leadership activities of teachers, I'd become by Christmas a kind of drop-out, a conscientious objector, a giver-in to repugnance.

I'm prepared to consider the hypothesis that these feelings are some kind of pathology. Some kind of petulant backlash at having finally submitted to graduate school. Or some kind of atrophy of the deep sexual hunger to tell people things. But on the other hand, perhaps the real pathology is the hunger to tell people things they didn't ask you to tell them. If this turns out to be true, if unsolicited telling turns out to hinder rather than help our goal of producing knowledge and understanding in students, then we will have to be honest enough to set up arenas where teachers can work off this appetite.

Perhaps my metaphor is too unsavory. But not too sexual. The one thing sure is that teaching is sexual. What is uncertain is which practices are natural and which unnatural, which fruitful and which barren, which legal and which illegal. When the sexuality of teaching is more generally felt and admitted, we may finally draw the obvious moral: it is a practice that should only be performed upon the persons of consenting adults.

But since I am not sure which is pathology—unsolicited telling or holding back—and since I don't yet know the grounds for deciding the question, I am merely asserting that it is possible to have these feelings, act on them, and live to tell the tale. Not go blind and insane. It is not a trivial point since so many teachers share these feelings but scarcely entertain them because they feel them unspeakable.

My present introductory literature course is the latest product of these feel-

ings. It is a sophomore course, but comparable to freshman English since it is more or less required and is the first English course taken. Most courses are structured around a class hour, a set of books, and a teacher's perception of the content. If a student's goals, perceptions, and motivation can fit into that structure, fine; if not, too bad. I have tried to stand that model on its head. The core of my course is each student's goals, perceptions, and willingness to do something about it. The other ingredients—the class hour and the teacher's perception of the content—are invited to fit into that structure if and where they can; and if not, too bad.

The course has three rules: (1) The student must state on paper, for everyone to read: at the beginning, what he wants to get out of the course; at mid-term and end of term, what he thinks he is getting and not getting. Each student may pursue his own goals; read anything and go in any direction. The only constraints are those imposed by reality. For example, I make it clear I am not going to spend any more time on the course than if I taught it in a conventional way. (2) Each student must read something each week: either literature or about literature. I offer my services in helping people find things suitable to their goals. (3) Each student must put words on paper (even if only to say he does not wish to write) once a week and put it in a box in the reserve reading room where everyone can read everyone else's and make comments. (There are about 20 in the class.) The writing need not be on what was read that week, though I ask the student to jot his reading down somewhere on the paper. Attendance is not required. Anyone who follows these rules is guaranteed an A. If not, he is not taking the course and I ask him to drop

it or flunk it. (I try not to be coercively non-directive: if a student's goals are to read what the teacher thinks most suitable for an introductory course and to get out of it what the teacher thinks he ought to get out of it, I try to help him with these goals.)

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I wish to describe my experience in this course in terms of five beliefs I end up with.

(1) Much teaching behavior really stems from an unwarranted fear of things falling apart. When I started to act on my new feelings and to refrain from unsolicited telling and asking, I discovered that that fear lay behind much of my previous teaching. I began to realize I'd always been "running" or "structuring" a class with the underlying feeling that if I ever stopped, some unspecifiable chaos or confusion would ensue. In all my teaching, there had been a not-fully-experienced sense of only precariously holding dissolution at bay.

But the unnamed disaster somehow doesn't happen. There is some confusion, desultoriness, and recurring silence, but the new class texture has an organic structure and stability. The class finds a new and stabler center of gravity. And I discover a mental or emotional muscle I've always been clenching to keep the ship from sinking or the plane from crashing. I discover it by feeling all of a sudden how tired it is.

But fears die hard. There are still days when it returns—my security may be low and my refusal flagging. I come in and ask, "Well, what is the question? How can we use our time?" The silence wells up. I reach for my pipe and throw myself into carefully prying out the old tobacco—which it is important to leave there for these situations—cleaning it, filling it, tamping, and managing never quite

to get it well lit so I can have something to keep busy with. All the while trying not to gulp. Not even cool enough to ask myself, "So what is this impending thing that is so scary? What's the disaster if nothing productive gets accomplished? You know perfectly well that they don't carry away much useful from your 'well run' classes."

Some students share this anxiety and some do not. Interestingly, it is usually the ostensibly "good" class—the productive and conscientious one—which persists longest in keeping up some kind of nervous chatter and prevents the class from finding its real center of gravity—usually silence at first and then some question about why in hell they are in this class doing what they are doing: with respect first to the class hour, then to the course, and only then to genuinely assented-to questions about the subject matter. It's so slow. And yet since I won't settle for any but genuinely assented-to questions, it represents a huge improvement and I'm not tempted to go back to the show-must-go-on. Surely many others must be trapped as I was by *unfelt* fears in their running of a class.

(2) An actual audience is crucial for writing. English teachers know it helps for the student to *imagine* an audience. But this is nothing compared to the benefit of actually having one. The best thing about my course is the fact that each student writes something weekly he knows the rest of the class will read and, for the most part, comment on.

An audience acts as suction. Only a few lucky or diligent souls find an audience *because* they write well. As often as not, people write well because they find an audience. They may not find a large and discriminating audience until after they get pretty good. But they had to start by being lucky, pushy, or driven

enough to find a genuine audience—even if small and informal. Writers like to say that a compulsion to write is the only necessary condition for being a good writer. The formula is elliptical and can be expanded in two directions: 1) the compulsion to write makes you find an audience and then you get better; or 2) the presence of an audience produces the compulsion to write. I sense everywhere a huge *potential* desire to be heard which the presence of an audience can awaken. A genuine audience can be tiny—even one person. But only exceptional teachers can succeed in being a genuine audience for more than a couple of their students. And a larger audience is better.

I have had the experience more than once of having thought I had finished writing something; sending it around and finally finding someone who would print it; and only then discovering a willingness to revise it again. Lack of character, perhaps, but a common disease which no college course can hope to cure.

The necessity of an audience is supported by the evidence about how children learn to speak: the audience is layed on for free and is eager for all productions; the child doesn't have to *deserve* it. Whether the infant's audience gives correction doesn't matter much. What matters is ongoing interaction: answering and talking, i.e., non-evaluative feedback. And no audience, no speech. Imagine the sorry results of an infant trying to learn to speak by a process equivalent to our freshmen English or writing courses.

The writing of the students in my course improves noticeably. They do not necessarily work on the kind of writing that someone else thinks they ought to. Few work consistently on critical, analytic essays. The majority write explora-

tions of their own experience. More poetry than I expected. But it is clear they are learning the basic elements or atoms for any sort of writing: how to work out thoughts and feelings into words; how to get words on paper such that the meanings get into the reader's head; and how to make the effects of those words on a reader more nearly what the writer intended.

The most solid evidence for the quality of their writing is that I actually enjoy reading the papers in the box each week. And they get more enjoyable each week. The voice and self of each writer continually emerge more forcefully.

(3) Students learn more about literature through writing than through reading. Many students don't really believe in the reality of words that come in books studied in school. I remember discovering, the first moment I was in France, that I hadn't really believed there were real people who spoke that funny language I studied in school and college. That unexpected, faint surprise revealed that part of me suspected all along that French was an elaborate hoax by schools and teachers to give me something difficult to learn. Paranoia, if you will, but again, a common disease.

And so in the case of literature, I feel students in this class doing with each other's writing the one thing—and a rare thing—that is a precondition for the appreciation and study of literature: taking the words seriously; giving full inner assent to their reality. I phrase the writing assignment as a requirement to "put words on paper such that it's not a waste of time for the reader or the writer." At last students wrestle with the main question—especially in an introductory course: What real value is there in putting words down on paper or in reading them? If a teacher feels the value is self-

evident, he should look to some of our cultural and literary critics who have serious doubts. Students share these doubts and it's no good saying they're not allowed to take them seriously till they know as much or write as well as, say, George Steiner. I suspect many English teachers insist so loudly on the importance of reading and writing because of an inner doubt that is too frightening to face. I'm struck by the quiet relief with which many English and writing programs swing into film. Students came to *enjoy* literature more than they ever have done in a course of mine because this question of whether it's worth putting words on paper at last became the center of the course—and operationally, not intellectually or theoretically.

(4) For learning, empirical feedback is a good thing and normative evaluation is a bad thing. Empirical feedback, in the case of writing, means learning what the words did to the reader. Normative evaluation means having the words judgmentally ranked according to some abstract standard. I have found that empirical feedback seems to encourage activity; to release energy. Presumably when one gets accurate, honest, human feedback—with all the inevitable contradictions between responders—one learns not to be scared to put forth words. Normative evaluation seems to inhibit words.

The value of having everyone in the class reading everyone else's writing is that it inevitably brings out empirical feedback and diminishes normative evaluation. Students often start out giving normative judgments: they've learned in school that "commenting" on a paper means saying whether it is good or bad. But these judgments are so diverse and conflicting that the writer can see how normative evaluations are usually skewed forms of personal, empirical feedback.

When there are many comments on a paper, it is perfectly clear that a statement like, "This is disorganized and uninteresting and doesn't really amount to anything," really means, "You bored me and I didn't perceive any organization or meaning here." For other comments show that other readers reacted entirely differently. The effect of this situation—and my urging—is that students get better at giving honest empirical feedback. (They did not, however, usually give *enough* commentary feedback to satisfy me and some of them.)

I grade as I do because of this distinction between feedback and judgment. When the grade is as meaningless as possible, the student can better believe, assimilate, and benefit from the feedback he gets from me and his classmates. I am frankly trying to channel my responses into personal, honest reactions, and keep them from being channeled into institutional normative judgments. Students write more than they have to, I think, because of a setting with maximum feedback and minimum judgment.

(5) It is good to separate constraints from freedoms with absolute clarity. I am tempted to think that the amount of freedom in a course makes less difference than how clearly it is distinguished from constraint. Almost any course contains more freedom than is first apparent, but if there is any ambiguity, the freedom ends up inhibiting rather than liberating energy.

I cannot resist speculating on the obscure dynamics here. I find myself and many students reading in constraints that are not there. "If I do such and such I'll get on the bad side of Smith," when in fact Smith couldn't care less. "If I teach in such and such a way, I will lose my job," when the teacher knows deep down that his latitude is immense if he is not

needlessly inflammatory. "I wouldn't be reading this crap except that he might put it on the exam," when the student knows deep down he would do better on the exam if he spent a fraction of the time seriously reading a "trot" and discussing it with a couple of friends. "I've got to take this course because they require it in graduate school" when he doesn't take the trouble to find out whether it is really so—and it usually isn't.

There must be good reasons for fooling ourselves in this way. For one thing, it may be a form of reacting to past occasions when we were stung: we were offered free choice but there were covert constraints. Students have had this experience many times. There is hardly a high school course that doesn't begin with the announcement, "Now you people can make what you want to out of this course."

Desires may also make one read in constraints that do not exist: it is hard—especially these days—to accept and experience the universal desire simply to be told what to do—to be held by arms too strong to break out of.

I can think of a third reason for feeling constraints that aren't there: if I feel some task as constrained rather than free, then I don't have to feel how much I care about it and fear failing. In short, I am spared the risk of investment and caring. Whatever the reason for this failure to experience the full degree of freedom or choice that exists, it causes a subtle, pervasive insulation against real learning—a covert non-assent or holding back from genuine participation in the knowledge that is seemingly attained.

As I see it, then, when choice is available, there is usually an initial resistance and tendency to do nothing at all. It is a threatening investment for many stu-

dents simply to do something school-like when they don't have to. If this can be gotten past, if the choice or freedom can be finally assented to and the investment made, there turns out to be a liberation of energy. But if there is any haziness or ambiguity about the choice, many students get stuck at the stage of feeling subtly constrained. They resent and resist the freedom. The freedom is not assented to, the hump is not gotten over, and there is no liberation of energy.

Such ambiguity can come from a teacher's unspoken doubts and hedges: "You can read whatever you want." ("So long as you don't read trash.") Or, "I am giving you this choice to exercise as you see fit." ("Only I wish I didn't have to give it to those of you who are lazy and don't give a damn about this subject because you won't use the freedom well and don't deserve it.") These unspoken thoughts get through to students—presumably through tone of voice, phrasing, and even physical gestures.

It follows from the idea that freedom and constraints should be clearly distinguished that rules are often a good thing. I used to feel rules were childish. We're in college now. Let's not go around making rules. But there are in fact many constraints at play upon us and our students—from the society, the institution, the teacher's idea of what is proper, or simply from the teacher's character or prejudices. It is liberating to get them into clear rules.

Students only learn to choose and to motivate themselves in spaces cleared by freedom. These spaces can be very small and still work, so long as they are not clouded by ambiguity. A teacher can give meaningful freedom even if he works within a very tightly constrained system. Suppose, for example, that every aspect of a course involves a constraint

stemming either from the institution's rules or the teacher's sense of what is non-negotiably necessary. If, in such a situation, the teacher decides nevertheless that the last fifteen minutes of each class period are genuinely free to be used as the class decides—or one full class a week—a new degree of freedom and learning will result.

I use class time for my example because it is usually the area of greatest ambiguity about freedom. So often we are trying for two goals at the same time: to create a free, unconstrained feeling (“free discussion”), and to *cover* points chosen in advance. (Sometimes, in fact, even to *conclude* things concluded in advance.) It is crucial in running a so-called free discussion to make up our minds—and make it clear to the class—what the rules really are. Almost any rules are workable so long as they are clear: “We can talk about anything so long as it has something to do with the assignment;” or, “I reserve the right to decide what the questions will be, but we can do anything in treating these questions;” or, “It can go where the class wants it to go, but I reserve the right to decide we are wasting time; but I admit I don’t know exactly what my criteria are for the decision; in fact I admit my criteria will vary with my mood.”

The only unworkable rule is a common unspoken one: “You must freely make my points.” When I finally sensed the presence of this rule and how unworkable it was, I was forced to see that if I feel certain points *must* be made in class, then I should make them as openly as I can—even through lectures—and not try to coax others to be my mouthpiece.

The problem of class time illustrates the fact that even though it is helpful and liberating to try to get things into a binary system of being either totally free

or totally constrained, most of us want some aspects of our course to be somewhere in between. For such grey areas of reality, we have a favorite phrase: “*It would be a good idea* if you did such and such.” I find it hard to break the habit, but I can now see it as one of the most self-defeating ways to ask students to do something. Even though the matter is not fully free or constrained, that is no excuse, it now seems to me, for not making up my mind whether I am saying, “You will get a lower mark if you don’t;” or, “You will learn less if you don’t;” or, “You will develop less character if you don’t;” or, “You will personally disappoint me or make my life harder if you don’t.” Each of these messages is perfectly valid and causes students little difficulty. But to fudge the issue of which is the true one has the effect of producing needless resistance.

In my efforts to distinguish clearly between areas of freedom and constraint and to make unambiguous, accurate messages about those things that lie somewhere between, I discovered why I hadn’t naturally stumbled into these practices before. They are hard. In particular, they put me more personally on the line and make me feel risk. For instance, in the case of sending messages, one of my favorites is, “I think it would be better for you to do X, but it is your choice and it doesn’t matter to me.” It’s unambiguous, all right. But unfortunately it is seldom accurate in my case. I seldom *am* indifferent about whether they do X. As I began to notice this, I began to realize that in many cases the only thing I was sure of was that *I* would feel better if they did X; and *not* that X was necessarily the best possible thing for all of them. But it is threatening to send the new, more accurate message. It makes me feel more vulnerable. And it permits

students who probably ought to do X to say the hell with it—sometimes purely out of a spirit of contrariness. But I feel it helps in the long run. It begins to make my word more trustworthy.

Similarly in the case of trying to make unambiguous rules, I found I was more likely than before to be thought of as a dirty rat by the student. I want the area of freedom to be very large, but nevertheless authority is more naked when one is unambiguous. Therefore more students are apt to be very angry about something or other—even about the freedom itself. As this made me very uncomfortable, I began to sense how much of my characteristic teaching behavior is an attempt to avoid being the object of the student's anger.

I suppose this whole exploration of the importance of being unambiguous about freedom and constraint—this renewed attack upon the old problem of freedom and necessity—is merely an extended way of saying that I find an inescapable power relationship in any institutionalized teaching. I feel this power relationship hinders the sort of learning situation I seek—one in which the student comes to act on his own motivation and comes to evaluate ideas and perceptions on their own merits and not in terms of who holds them. I feel I can best minimize this power relationship by getting the weapons out on the table. Trying to pretend that the power and weapons are not there—however swinging I am and however groovy the students are—only gets the power more permanently and insidiously into the air.

It may be, of course, that it is misguided and perverse of me to want to get rid of the power relationship: my own hang-up about authority. Certainly the power relationship can be viewed as a potent audio-visual aid for a mature

teacher to welcome and use honestly and constructively. Either verdict, however, points to the importance of recognizing the power relationship.

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Because I'm confident the course is working at an important level, I want to share my frustrations. First, inevitably, not enough gets *covered* in class. It's all very well to make fun of the teacher's itch to "cover" a lot, but the itch is so real. Allowing everyone to choose his own reading makes it harder for the class to come together in a focused discussion. In the future I may ask that we somehow come up with a mechanism for focusing one class a week upon a common text or planned topic of discussion.

There were times when I could honestly have said, "Damn it, this desultory, wandering small talk and local gossip is downright boring to me. Can't we do something more interesting and substantive? Otherwise I'll simply go on sitting here wishing my alarm hadn't gone off." I didn't dare say it, but now I suspect I should have. Reticence about these feelings probably made more oppressive vibrations than expressing them would have done. It's as though I feared I had some super, demolishing power and they were nothing but weak and defenseless. Whereas if I had just said it, maybe it would have helped us all sooner to get past a loaded and awkward way of behaving with each other—strengthened their autonomy and reduced my self-consciousness. To carry this off, however, I'd have to succeed in saying it and meaning it as one person who feels dissatisfied—not as someone who harbors the insistence that the class follow my feelings.

I found, by the way, that longer classes of this sort are more productive than

shorter ones. It's worth trying to change three 50-minute classes a week into two longer ones. It's too easy for everyone to wait it out for 50 minutes and avoid the effort and investment of overcoming inertia—holding the breath till the end of the period. It also seems worth informal rescheduling to avoid a situation where you are asking students to break out of their habitual, passive, class role at eight or nine in the morning when their metabolisms aren't even fired up yet.

But I'm sure the problem of low productivity in class won't disappear. Students display strong reactions to past teaching. They do a lot of testing because they have historical reason for suspecting there is a catch. They will inevitably spend considerable time pushing the limits to see whether they are in the presence of that hidden rule underlying so many current educational experiments: "You may do whatever you want —so long as it's not something we feel is a waste of time."

I was also frustrated by what I perceive as a rampant individualism. At the operational level, this took the form of an aversion to working together in subgroups with common reading. Even though many of them had similar goals, this never happened. It discouraged me. The individualism took an epistemological form as well: a tendency to operate on the unspoken premise that "I know what I perceive, feel, and think; if I try to get any of these into words or into someone else's head, there is only distortion and loss, and it's not worth the effort." They were scarcely willing even to entertain the opposite premise, namely, "I don't know what I perceive, feel, or think *until* I can get it into language and perhaps even into someone else's head."

So students didn't seem to doubt their

own individual perceptions of a text. They seemed uninterested in testing one individual's perceptions against another's. But I persist in thinking I shouldn't force this activity. I feel less worried about their emerging from my course with skewed perceptions of texts than about their persistence in not wanting to do anything about it. I see their wrong-headed, or at least parochial, point of view itself as a kind of proof that required corrective discussions haven't worked in the past. Why should they work better now?

During the term I saw no cure except patience for this student stance of I-don't-need-anybody's-help-to-see-accurately. I had already sensed a quiet refusal in it: they understood perfectly well, as anyone does, that their perceptions were liable to be skewed. The refusal annoyed me. But as I think about it now, I see I can do more. First I am led to try to guess what experience might produce this epistemological arrogance. And then try to see if I can experience it vicariously myself. This is what I come up with: "Look! For years and years, you English teachers have been saying things and forcing us to do things which all tended to make us feel we have defective sensing mechanisms: our very perceptions are wrong—our own responses invalid. Almost invariably, the poem or character I preferred was shown less worthy of preference than one which left me cold. I was always noticing things that you seemed to show irrelevant, and failing to notice things you seemed to show most relevant. You may be able to convince me I have defective perception in literature; but you can't make me want to rub my nose in it. So now you tell me I can do what I want with a literature class and you want me to go in for more of that? Not on your life!"

So where I once felt indifference and even arrogance about individual perception, I now feel a pervasive defensiveness and doubt. Where I once saw teachers as too unconvincing, I now see they were too convincing. I wish I'd felt this earlier because it dispels my annoyance and that annoyance probably made things worse. For I now see as healthy and positive their refusal to joust publicly with their own responses until they are a bit confident, or at least comfortable and self-accepting, about them. For myself, certainly, I can't really expose my own responses for refinement or correction, as here, until I feel pretty good about them. Only then, paradoxically, can I truly open myself to the possibility that they are seriously skewed, and allow myself ungrudgingly to move on to different, more accurate perceptions.

Another frustration is that I feel much less useful in such a teaching situation. My head is bursting with fascinating things that the dirty rats didn't ask me. (Half way through the term, however, I saw I should join in the activity of putting words on paper once a week for the box. So that gave me a forum that seemed appropriate.) As teachers we tend to assume we are useful to students, and that the more we are used—the more they get from us—the better we are doing. I think we should take a ride on the opposite premise and see where it leads—the premise that we can be of very little use and that we may not be doing badly if they get very little from us. Einstein put it bluntly in a letter:

Incidentally, I am only coming to Princeton to research, not to teach. There is too much education altogether, especially in American schools. The only rational way of educating is to be an example—of what to avoid, if one can't be the other sort. (*The World as I See It*, pp. 21-2.)

Another frustration is that one must put up with great naïveté. But I am convinced, now, that when you allow real choice and self-motivated learning, the student reverts to the point at which real learning last took place. This often means going way back. They revert to what they really feel and think—not to what they normally produce in classes, papers, and tests. John Holt talks shrewdly of how primary school arithmetic teachers often find themselves keeping the class discussion within channels implied by the textbook because the children can thereby produce correct answers; whereas if things wander into novel or unexpected byways, the teacher is forced to confront the overwhelmingly discouraging fact that the children don't really understand the most elementary concept of arithmetic which they have already "mastered." I feel I often see students demonstrate they don't really understand many things they have a competent academic mastery of. That is, they haven't "really learned" them—they haven't been willing or able to digest, assent to, or participate in the knowledge of these things. For this reason I feel we should view as progress this reversion to naïve stations where real learning stopped.

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In the end, I am led back to a new perception of those original pesky feelings: something has been motivating me all along which only now comes to awareness. I sense differently now those refusals to tell things unsolicited, to ask questions, and to pedal alone. I feel them now as more positive. Behind the reticence and sense of being gagged lies a need to be genuinely listened to, to carry some weight, to make a dent. I want a chance for my words to penetrate to a level of serious consciousness. And that

need is great enough that I'll pay a large price. I'll settle for very few words indeed. Behind my ostensible openness lies an intense demandingness. If I didn't really want to be demanding, I could teach the old "well-run" course that students let roll off their backs so easily. It's my desire to be heard that makes me insist that the students figure out what they want to know.

I am like the teacher of the noisy class who says, ever so sweetly, "Now boys and girls, I'm not going to say another thing until you are quiet enough for me to be heard." (Stifled cheers!) But my intuition had enough sense to take things into its own hands and insist that I didn't have a chance of being heard until they made *more* noise. I think this is true even at the literal level: in my few good classes, I have to fight to be heard, but my words carry more real weight—the weight of a person and not just a teacher. If I want to be heard at all, I've got to set up a situation in which the options of whether to hear me or tune me out—whether to take me seriously or dismiss me—are more genuine than in a normal classroom field of force. I'm refusing, therefore, to be short-circuited by a role which students react to with the stereotyped responses to authority: either automatic, ungentle acceptance or else automatic, ungentle refusal.

I don't know whether this underlying need to be truly heard is a good thing or a bad thing: whether the ineffectual parts of my teaching come from not fully inhabiting this basic feeling, or from not having gotten over it. I imagine two different answers from students. I imagine them saying,

Well, it's about time you had the guts to feel and admit your mere humanity—your desire to get through and your need to make a difference. There's no hope for you as a teacher as long as you come on with this self-delusion about being disinterested, non-directive, and seeking only the student's own goals and motivation. In that stance, you can never succeed in being anything for us but cold, indifferent, and a waste of our time—ultimately enraging.

But I also hear them saying,

For Christ's sake, get off our back! We've got enough to think about without your personal need to make a dent on us. What do you think we are? objects layed on to gratify your need to feel your life makes a difference?

My teaching has benefited in the past from experiencing more fully the feelings which generate what I try to do. So I trust this new clarification of feeling must be progress even if I don't yet know what to think of it.