The Definition of Teaching

Peter Elbow
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I. What Follows from the Wrong Definition

A dilemma for teachers: a student takes a required college course he doesn’t want to take—perhaps Freshman English; he is badly prepared for it by his previous studies; he displays those behaviors we call “lazy” and “stupid;” he doesn’t want to be in college anyway, but prefers the army less; what’s more the concept “neurotic-need-to-fail” seems to apply: now if he fails the course, is it the teacher’s fault?

If you answer no, you reveal the wrong definition of teaching. My example is extreme because we are wasting our time if we do not face this question in its starkest form: we must choose whether we define teaching as producing understanding or showing up with the goods.

A good teacher faces squarely the fact that producing understanding is his task and he doesn’t try to reduce the frustration by defining the goal out of it. He will see his own failure in the case of this difficult student. But he won’t take a simpleminded view. He won’t deny the student’s own responsibility for failing. These matters are overdetermined. There is always more than enough fault to go around. Similarly, he will realize that most other teachers would have failed with this student. The experience will simply teach him he chose a difficult vocation; he must expect to fail more than occasionally.

I don’t think the preceding qualifications—hedges you may say—have destroyed the operational difference between the two definitions of teaching. A teacher’s behavior strikingly reveals whether he defines teaching one way or the other—whether he avails himself of defensive pacifiers like “Well, if he didn’t get the material that’s his problem;
he probably shouldn’t be in college.” And if you don’t have a chance to observe the teacher in action, ask his students. Most will be correct in their sense of whether his goal is producing understanding or merely showing up with the goods.

“You’ve set up a straw man! You use an extreme example to obscure the fact that everyone defines teaching as producing understanding. Of course it’s empty to define teaching as merely showing up with the goods.” This objection may fit the going rhetoric about teaching, but some of the most central characteristics of higher education are in fact functional with showing-up-with-the-goods. I am referring to those conditions which too easily permit the very metaphor “goods”: a tendency to conceive the ingredients of the teaching enterprise as information, ideas, or answers—conveyable commodities. The current conceptions of “discipline,” “field,” and “professional” reinforce these conditions and thus ultimately reinforce showing-up-with-the-goods as the definition of teaching.

The common model of the desirable university teacher is someone who is a professional who has a discipline and a field. His preparation is the task of mastering or getting the discipline and field; and his duty while a teacher is to keep up with them. But do disciplines move? “Don’t be impertinent! Of course they do. The acceleration these days in all disciplines is undeniable.” But this is not the whole answer. For to the extent that having a discipline is conceived as possessing ideas and information which fall in a certain realm, it constitutes an argument for keeping up with the awesome increases that take place there. But to the extent that having a discipline is conceived as having learned to handle certain kinds of questions and problems—having mastered a certain heuristic—it is an argument for going beyond it; an argument for learning to see the limits and blindspots of the heuristic you have mastered by getting outside it and not simply exercising it for the rest of a career. (This is not to say there are no changes in the heuristic of a discipline. But such changes are relatively slow and can, in fact, be better understood and digested by forays outside the discipline in order to get free from its set.) I am not trying to drive out the first conception of discipline. It is valid. Merely to argue for legitimizing the second.

Of course it sounds glib to talk of mastering and going beyond the heuristic of a discipline when a whole lifetime of devoted work does not produce complete mastery. But I would still insist on the law of diminishing returns: one year’s work outside can often produce a greater breakthrough in the original field than five years of struggle within it. Quite apart, even, from consideration of plain staleness.

Getting information and ideas is often overemphasized in the procedures of getting a PhD. Too often neglected is the activity of learning how to open out new questions, new problems, unnoticed premises; and learning how to deploy and assess various and contrasting sorts of thinking. When getting a PhD feels too primarily like amassing answers, teachers drift into assuming that undergraduate teaching—for which the PhD was presumably training—consists of dispensing these garnerings. It appears that more and more undergraduate teaching is of this variety: courses comprising a body of ideas and information—showing up with the goods.

II. What Follows from the Right Definition.

What, first of all, does producing understanding imply about the nature of the transaction between teacher and student? Surely it is not the transmission of information and ideas, since the possession of answers—even fairly articulate and developed ones—does not necessarily
involve understanding in any full sense of the word. Understanding is not a function of ideas and information but rather of being in a certain kind of relation to ideas and information: not simply having them but a certain kind of having.

A student who has merely been put in possession of ideas and information—even when they are of the most approved sort—is easily distinguished from one who has been genuinely taught. (Even if the latter has fewer ideas or less excellent ones.) The one who merely has ideas will make naive blunders when he goes outside the areas of his ideas: he will be bound and blinded by the premises of his received goods.

Besides, a teacher is a far less satisfactory source of ideas and information than books, libraries, and information retrieval systems. Since the time that books were readily accessible, it has been anachronistic to use teachers for this function.

If, on the other hand, there is a commodity which is transmitted to the student, it is the ability to answer questions he doesn't know the answers to. The crucial thing needed here is not a function of answers—having a sufficient stock of them or knowing where to find more. Only the easiest of questions submit themselves to such equipment. The crucial thing needed is a function of questions. The key to solving problems that seem too hard is the ability to break them down into ones that are soluble, or to find soluble ones implied behind them; or even to connect them merely associatively with soluble ones. This means the student must obtain the ability to ask new questions; he thereby comes up with relevant ideas and information which he might have known or could have found all along, but which he hadn't previously perceived as relevant. For the student to produce under his own steam a question he never thought of is extremely difficult. (The fact that he never thought of it shows it may be one of his unexamined premises.) But the activity is crucial to trustworthy thinking. Producing an answer he never thought of is easy once he has the right question.

Therefore what the teacher has is not a thing but a process—a capacity for seeing and asking new questions. Or one hopes he has it. But of course he can't give it. He can only hope to plan and create situations in which the student comes to develop it. Ideas and information will grow almost as a matter of course out of the good functioning of this capacity to ask new questions. Literature teachers will be more aware than most that it is process they are trying to impart, not information.

If, then, our definition of teaching is producing-understanding, and if that means producing in the student the ability to make problems soluble by being able to see and feel new questions, what else follows? One thing is a clear and simple assessment of the standard, university lecture course. We can see with precision that it spends most of the time doing what is relatively easy and unneeded—providing ideas and information—and spends almost no time at all doing what is incredibly difficult and universally needed—producing the ability to ask new questions and solve problems. Hearing and trying to ingest ideas and information—and even new questions—is not the best way to produce this capacity.

It is true that one lecture in a thousand does indeed work. By magic. By virtue of being a work of art or being a compelling witness and living evocation of a great man. But such lectures are not wholly lectures. Their value lies more in what they are than what they say. It would be an exaggeration to say all other lectures are ineffectual. Who hasn't learned important things from standard lectures? It's just that they are a waste of time. A student who is already
asking and feeling the right questions will get the ideas and information far quicker by reading. And the student who is not asking and feeling the right questions can be gotten to do so far quicker in a situation where he practices and develops that very activity—where he is confronted with problems, must make responses, seek helpful new questions, and where he gets encouragement and immediate critical feedback in the process.

I am not trying to prove by our definition of teaching that small discussions are the only answer. It is reasonable to guess that other methods either exist or could be devised for a teacher to lead large groups in a genuinely useful activity. For example, perhaps it is not necessary that the responses be out loud and overt. Some say that exactly the activity I am talking about occurs in some of the huge classes (200-300) in Harvard Law School in which the teacher simply goes around the class asking questions. Evidently some of these classes function in such a way that everyone in the large class is trying to answer the questions asked. Surely the silence during which 300 students are trying to figure out an issue is far more valuable than the sound of the voice of any but the most magical lecturer. (No doubt means can be devised to disguise the fact that this is probably the oldest, most reactionary, and non-experimental pedagogy that exists.) We need experiment, research, and ingenuity to find other procedures which confront large numbers with problems, encourage all to make responses and seek relevant new questions, and give both encouragement and immediate critical feedback.

Two other directions suggest themselves: small, teacherless classes; and individual instruction using devices like programmed books or machines which ask questions hard and interesting enough to force the student to use his imagination and problem-solving capacity.

Nevertheless I do not wish to under-emphasize the value of small discussion classes. Even though they are very expensive and even though they can sometimes seem like a chaotic waste of time, they are a far-better investment than lectures. Of course, the feeling that a discussion class was a waste of time may be correct—it may have been disastrously run. Why assume that teachers who have had no training at it should do it well? But this feeling of wasted time is sometimes a result of the wrong point of view: if the goal is the most efficient transmission of a specific body of ideas and information, obviously a discussion class will seem like a waste of time.

(Though even this may not be true in the long run: one lecture will “transmit” more ideas and information than one discussion class; but a term of discussion classes is likely to produce far more ideas and information in the students than a term of lectures. The difficulty is that they may not be exactly the same ideas and information that were in the teacher’s head: teachers who want to hear back only their own ideas and information find discussion classes unsatisfactory.)

Surely teachers who lecture are not really aware of what they are thereby saying to their students: 1) “I am a moral and artistic genius and this lecture is a work of art more valuable than what the course is about; or at least my personal and professional magnetism is so great that you should all sit in my lectures rather than try to make do with my books and my colleagues.” 2) “The mimeograph machine is broken” (the real contents of any lecture can surely be dittoed on a couple of pages. 3) “I prefer to have you learn less.” 4) “I am so frightened of you that I cannot let you speak more than stray comments and questions; I cannot allow your full presence in class.” If there are any other excuses for lecturing I wish people would publish them. There’s something
pathetic about a profession which constantly talks about how unsatisfactory lecturing is, and yet continues it as a staple technique. Perhaps this journal would publish defenses of lecturing so we could get to the bottom of this matter.

III. A Spirit of Questioning

But if our goal is producing understanding, and if that means producing the ability to see new questions, there is one thing that is probably more important than any pedagogical or curricular structure: that the teacher have and share a spirit of questioning, wondering, and doubting. The questions the teacher brings into the classroom are worth more than any answers. But they must be real, felt questions which the teacher himself can take part in, and not merely pedagogical exercises. For it is not the number of questions that counts but the spirit of questioning.

Before getting down to concrete and trustworthy ways of exploring this issue, I cannot resist sharing my subjective sense that the academic world is relatively poor these days in a spirit of wondering, questioning, and uncertainty. Some kinds of doubt are not so hard to find: about evidence, data, and low-level explanation. And also there is plenty of talk (though only in some disciplines) about the uncertainty of methodology and premises. But on the day-to-day, operational level—in lectures, class discussion, faculty meetings, department meetings, and course-planning—there is far less than one might expect of real deep down uncertainty about premises, methodology, point of view, and most of all simply how to feel toward crucial issues. Of course there is plenty of dispute in the academic world. And dispute should be a great question-opener for breeding uncertainty and new points of view. But the very tone and texture of much of this dispute—its shrill acrimony—reveals to the contrary that it is dispute between persons who cannot or will not admit uncertainty. This sort of dispute simply hardens people into the positions they start with.

We have come almost to take for granted the spectacle of departments which surpass in their conduct of academic policy the very practice which members criticize in the President’s conduct of foreign policy: causing or trying to cause opposing points of view forcibly to disappear. The charge that a national government is intolerant of dissent is emasculated when it comes from men who strive to prevent their own students from being confronted with teachers who conceive and practice their discipline in a different fashion.

For these serious but vague charges I don’t know how to offer compelling evidence. Unless they correspond to things the reader has already noticed, I cannot hope to persuade. A possible corroboration, however, is to notice how hungry students are for teachers who can show uncertainty or share doubt; teachers who can share real questioning in the subject matter and not just ask questions which invite answers already formulated by the questioner; teachers who are still willing to learn—even from students.

If the charge and the evidence are vague, one explanation for the problem is equally so. And even if true, perhaps it is only a minor cause. Yet I cannot resist taking it seriously. I think it is not uncommon that the preparation for college teaching involves decisive compromises of the very ideals which made the person want to be a college teacher in the first place. The cynicism of persons finishing their PhD is astoundingly universal—a cynicism that was seldom there at the start. This is not the place to analyze the sources of this reaction—to see whether perhaps it is inevitable, or whether perhaps these men are misguided, childish, or naughty to react as they do. I would merely insist that the
phenomenon exists and insist on being worried at its effects in the classroom and the university. The relationship between this cynicism and a lack of questioning is direct: a person does not easily question or doubt something which he felt—whether accurately or not—he procured in some sense or other by selling out.

Selling out is a strong term here. After all, we are not talking about taking bribes or foreshewing propositions known to be true. Merely about matters of methodology: what constitutes acceptable subjects or modes of inquiry. But the idealism that brings people to teaching is often idealism in precisely this realm. It can feel like selling out to restrict inquiry to what is professionally sanctioned—usually to what fits the discipline or the methodology of the discipline. For many, the process feels like abandoning what is important for what is trivial. Too many teachers feel that their professional training constituted little progress in the quest for genuine human understanding which brought them to teaching. It's no good to object that such feelings are wrong; it may be a good car but if it doesn't sell where are you? If graduate schools cannot persuade their students of the worth of the program, there is little reason to believe that the program is working. But if "selling out" galls as a metaphor, we can use "investment." Kenneth Boulding points out how a man does not easily question a war in which he has invested a limb of his body. The model is not inappropriate to the way many respond to the Ph.D. process.

Some will call this hyperbole. Since it is intuitive I cannot ask all readers to assent. But I think there is an irrefragable minimum here: for many people sense the muting of a valuable human quality in the process of getting a Ph.D.; that quality seems to be a fecundity and catholicity of questioning—a really open sense of wondering.

If we turn now to our particular discipline of literary study—the paradigm of the non-empirical, non-scientific discipline—we can see that we have a special and paradoxical need for the spirit of questioning. You would think no one could be arrogant in a discipline where nothing is certain. But where things are not certain there seems greater danger that people will be. By contrast, in a field where more certainty is possible, practitioners know they will be shown up if they talk foolishly. It's a matter of what you can get away with.

It is true, of course, that scientists do not deal in complete certainty, and for them mistakes can turn into good or true ideas. But at least they have a definition of a mistake. They have agreed-on rules for evidence and inference. This state of scientific discourse encourages a desirable frame of mind: the knowledge that there are tests for fuzzy-thinking or nonsense, yet also that new and even strange hypotheses are always needed to test these tests.

What a contrast to the condition of discourse in the study of literature. When we are faced with a statement about what a work of literature means or how it works, we have no agreed-on rules for evaluating it—no procedures for showing that it is true, or even that it is false—not even conditionally. (Some say this will always be so. But since the winnowing passage of centuries often gives a pretty good idea of which critical statements were true and which false, I believe there must be specifiable differences between them. If so, one of the tasks of criticism is to try to devise procedures for quicker winnowing. Thus a book like Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* (New York, 1967). But it will be slow, messy work at best.)

In territory not occupied by agreed-on

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2 Michael Polanyi explores in *Personal Knowledge* the crucial ways in which this statement is at issue.
rules of evidence and inference, there shall ego be. This makes for a serious problem in teaching: if a hard science teacher makes a foolish or incorrect statement in class, there is every chance that before the class or the term ends a student will not only know it but will demonstrate it to the class and the teacher. This state of affairs forcibly keeps a teacher honest. It is unknown to the teacher of literature. About his bread-and-butter statements—"what this poem really means is..." or "the way this novel works is..."—the English teacher can never be compelled to see (much less admit) that he is mistaken. . . .

In such a realm of discourse the truth of a statement depends as much on who is speaking as what is said. A dreadful state of affairs—really a "priest" model of discourse—but one which we must not blink. When tempted to underestimate it I need only remember the peculiarly frustrating nature of the transaction in an argument between me and someone with a much better critical judgment. He cannot necessarily say anything to convince or persuade me he is right. He will give arguments and evidence, it is true, but there is no such thing as a compelling argument in criticism. If I'm not ready to see his point I simply won't see it. Yet in the past I have so often subsequently and gradually come around under my own steam to believe that he was right that now I must recognize he has the greater chance of being right. He has the mantle. He can listen to things I cannot hear, but he cannot necessarily tell me what he hears—only his conclusions.

This has disastrous consequences for the classroom. For everything makes the teacher look like the priest. He has the mantle, the training, and the initiation. My God, can all the Ph.D. effort count for nothing? Yet we must recognize that his freshman student may be the priest and hear things he cannot hear. We all know that those who are consistently better at knowing what a poem is about or what effect it has on a reader are not always older, more experienced, or more professionally trained. Their inside track derives from a quality of personal sensibility that is not necessarily a product of professional training. Indeed such training can smother it under received opinion. Thus the literature teacher is called on for the humility of a saint. The occasional advantage of the teacher without professional training is that he at least has not been conned into trusting his own assertions. The Ph.D. ritual says, in effect, "we have tested the answers this man gives to questions about certain areas of literature and we find them trustworthy." Whereas, of course, in the humanities he cannot specify and may not even be able to recognize the difference between a truth and a falsehood.

If, then, a spirit of questioning is important for good teaching, and if the state of discourse in English presents paradoxical dangers of arrogance in the classroom, what can we do about it? First we must notice the shortcomings of the commonest solution—intellectual or scholarly prudence (or what seems prudence): "Don't be dogmatic, don't make sweeping assertions, don't let yourself get carried away." One difficulty with this advice is most obvious in the form in which we pass it along to students—"don't generalize!" If the advice were merely impossible to follow it would do little harm. Actually, however, it does harm when it poses as humility or prudence. For though there is nothing inherently wrong with qualifying one's generalizations—curtailing their implications and saying "in most cases"—teachers often profess in doing so to avoid dogmatism. But actually they are thereby clinging to dogmatism—building thicker walls against the possibility of having to back down or change their mind. It is a technique for decreasing the statistical likelihood of error in a statement by reducing the area of its
application. Statistically it sort of works, but since the very germ of any statement in criticism is inherently untrustworthy, the technique only achieves trustworthiness as the area of application approaches zero. (In the light of this formula, much contemporary scholarship at last comes clear.) In short, no amount of scholarly rigor or discretion can make any assertion in criticism more than a subjective speculation, yet it is often used to justify massive dogmatism and inflexibility.

In the light of an understanding of how scholarly discretion may really mask arrogance and a refusal to question, we can correspondingly see how a true and healthy spirit of questioning can take the form of strong opinions strongly expressed. (Philip Rahv is a limiting case. I hadn't till now been able to figure out why he manages to be an excellent teacher when he seems so flagrantly dogmatic: he's apt to say to you when you are in his class, "that's the stupidest idea I ever heard in my life." And mean it. But as you pick yourself up off the floor you realize not only that you haven't been hurt at all, but that indeed there's something far more open and less coercive in his behavior than in that of many teachers who appear more open minded.) Thus a successful solution to the problem of having no agreed-on rules of evidence and inference in literary study is for the teacher to express his position unequivocally—even though not lecturing. This stance can embody—as much or more than any other—a true prudence: it can say to the student, "This is my opinion. What's yours? Look to it because I'll fight you on it. I've shown you what you must make a dent on if you wish to change my mind." Only as we put our own position on the line do we truly confess its hypothetical nature and allow students the opportunity to change it. If we ask of the student the ability to change his mind, to see something differently, we have no hope of producing it unless we display it too. Expounding massively buttressed positions does not teach it. Student pickets against teachers in humanities should read, "When was the last time you changed your mind in class?" and "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken."

That there is more arrogance among teachers of the soft humanities than of the hard sciences would be impossible to demonstrate. I must confess, however, that I believe it. But I hope I have compelled the reader to see that arrogance in the humanities is more dangerous than it is in the hard sciences: we have no built-in corrective against it. Many students prefer science to humanities, not because they hunger simplistically for certainty, as many humanists are fond of believing, but rather because they prefer an arena where doubt thrives more healthily—where teachers know their statements may be demonstrated wrong, where a teacher is not free, should he be temperamentally inclined, to assert whatever he pleases and make it stick for the purposes of his course.

IV. A New Model for Teaching

Let us turn from tender issues to the simple and indubitable fact that many teachers are bored with the courses they teach. In such a condition they are clearly failing to bring to their classroom the questioning and doubt that is crucial. Often they have taught their present course for a number of years, and even more often they have been teaching courses in the same field of the same discipline for their whole career. This field is determined by their first job and their publication, which in turn were determined by their thesis topic, which in turn was often determined by which seminar paper happened to reveal most clearly the possibility of expansion to a thesis. It may or may not have been the field of strongest interest. Indeed the graduate student will hear cogent faculty advice not to choose a topic that feels
important. Besides, some teachers get bored teaching courses every year even in an area they love.

Why pay a bored teacher to teach? The loss is greater than the gain. It bores and angers students who would have become involved if left alone with a good reading list. It would help to pay a bored teacher to refrain from teaching, but we can do better. Such a teacher has an invaluable function. He can provide a really detailed and annotated bibliography to someone who wants to teach the course and to the students; and be a resource consultant for the new teacher and perhaps the students. The most obvious candidate for the new teacher is a young one from the same discipline who, though less experienced, is not bored with the area. Perhaps even a graduate student. Something like this arrangement is not uncommon now. But having full responsibility to teach the course is crucial: the present arrangement of once-a-week section men trying to pick up the pieces of another man's course is no answer.

But why not use an experienced teacher from a different discipline? Of course he would have to work very hard during the preceding term or summer and also while teaching this course. He would have to be in an apprentice-like relationship to a colleague or two in disciplines not his own. He would have to live with the feeling of running at top speed merely to keep up with the class; the feeling that some of the students are not merely brighter than he—a probability in any class—but even more sophisticated in the discipline of the course. (The teacher, however, would hopefully be more experienced at learning and sensing questions.) He would have to be willing to share his questions, his uncertainty, and his heuristic searching with the class—and not merely his conclusions as is now so often the case. He would have to be willing to walk into a class hour or a term knowing that some of the most important conclusions will only emerge during that hour or term—and yet not relinquish efforts to work out conclusions on his own—not merely wallow in cognitive passivity, interesting confusion, or creative fooling around.

Many would not call these optimum teaching conditions. But some would. The short, unstructured winter terms in some colleges reveal how many teachers wish to share with students exploration outside their discipline.

Under present conditions, however, teachers prefer to teach courses that bore them. New and different courses would take them away from their writing and research which is often the sole source of their career advancement. And many teachers are extremely jealous of encroachments into their field by other teachers, even if they are bored. The present system implies that if someone else can teach in his field there is no reason for him to be hired at all.

If a university sanctioned this kind of poaching there would be a significant minority of teachers who would welcome the opportunity periodically to teach a course in another discipline, and more who would like to do it very occasionally. This development would act as a leaven for the whole university and bring more learning into all classrooms. Such teaching might not at first seem attractive to those whose main goal is professional prestige in their discipline; an exceedingly timid university might even be unwilling to consider such teaching as “meaningful research” and thus implicitly limit the experiment to teachers with tenure. But people would discover before long that such “research” did in fact lead in the long run to better and more significant professional work by the experimenters, and thus, even, to professional prestige.

This all flies in the face of a seemingly indisputable axiom: that a man should teach only in areas in which he has proven professional training and compe-
tence. But why not experimentally ques-
tion that axiom since it is at least one of
the ingredients in a status quo which
leads to lots of unsatisfactory teaching,
and since getting a spirit of questioning
and uncertainty into the classroom is one
of the main things that follows from
teaching as producing-understanding?
What this proposal really amounts to is
a re-examination of what research means
and how it relates to teaching.

V. Teaching and Research

Research can perfectly well be jus-
tified for its own sake: trying to find out
things it would be good to find out. Especially when the research is good and
the university can afford it. But research
is frequently justified as helpful for
teaching—for keeping a teacher “alive”
and making him teach better. Given the
accepted implications about what con-
stitutes research, this second justification
is misguided.

Research often harms teaching. Be-
cause a teacher’s research is often only
remotely related to his courses, he often
prepares notes from which he can teach
or lecture for many years with little
preparation: he just runs through those
notes ahead of time and proceeds to teach
his class. If such a teacher is really in-
volved in his research, he seldom thinks
about the material in his courses except
while going over his notes and while in
the classroom.

“Why not?” it may be objected.
“After all, he is a professional in this
area. Why shouldn’t careful notes and
periodic review fit him perfectly well
for teaching undergraduates? Though
the material may be complex and diffi-
cult, he will be in firm control of it: it’s
because he is a professional in it, and
has it almost as second nature, that he is
qualified to teach it.”

The answer to this objection points
up the central issue. If the teacher’s
function is only to bring in the com-
modities of ideas and information—even
of mastery and expertise—such a method
is fine. (Actually, of course, it results in
some shoddy transmission of second-rate
goods.) But if teaching means producing
understanding, the teacher’s mastery of
ideas and information is not in itself a
sufficient condition. He needs to bring
real wondering, questioning, and uncer-
tainty into the classroom.

Ideas and information can be long and
efficiently stored—by the mind and in
notes—in the form of unified hierarchies
of generalizations. What cannot be so
efficiently retained over the months and
years are the many questions, uncertain-
ties, not-quite-so-neat details and myriad
ramifications of the subject with every-
thing else. If a teacher is teaching a book
he has not really read in five years—(will
my adversaries act shocked and say it
never happens, or say “why not?”)—his
memory and notes will be good for giv-
ing the main outline and his main con-
clusions. This perspective—this “big pic-
ture”—can be very useful for teaching.
But he will not be in touch with the
specific details, difficulties, and percep-
tions of his students unless he too has
been reading it recently.

I hasten to admit that there are natural-
ly excellent teachers with an unquench-
able instinct for living with questions
and ambiguities. When they return from
even the most distant research to teach
from notes and quick review, they nat-
urally bring the subject to life in the
classroom and produce understanding in
their students. But most of us are not
naturally excellent teachers. We need
structures to bring out our best, not ones
which do least to bring it out. Research
as presently defined improves teaching
only when the two are very closely
connected—as in many graduate seminars
and only a few undergraduate courses.
Otherwise research often lowers the cali-
ber of teaching.

But if we call research a teacher’s in-
vestigation into a specialized area of his
discipline and we see the mutual benefit
in sharing that activity with an advanced seminar, why shouldn't we also call research his investigation into an entirely different discipline and why shouldn't he also share that seeking with students? The fact is, however, that such an activity, in today's academic world, would not feel like research but like amateurish dilettantism. This feeling is a tool for becoming more conscious of what we imply in “research”: an expert working in a specialized field who starts out knowing more than most people about the area and ends up knowing more than anyone else about what becomes the exact locus of his research; he will publish these original findings.

But should we mean this by research? Or if we cannot change the connotations of our language, should we demand this as the necessary condition for college teaching? It's not that this sort of research is bad—as long as it is carried out with integrity. (Of course much is not and therefore it is hard to find the real thing in crowded journals.) But I cannot think why we should restrict research to that model.

Expertise should not be a necessary condition of research. Whether or not a man has a Ph.D., clearly some of the most important things for him to find out about—not only in order to be an effective teacher of undergraduates, but even to turn out decent publication in his own special field—will not be in that field but in different disciplines—disciplines in which his learning stance is anything but that of an expert. Indeed, there are a number of disciplines which should encourage practitioners to work in other disciplines. This is most obvious for those which build on others: classics, political science, sociology, anthropology, etc. But also, as I am trying to demonstrate elsewhere, there are disciplines which study concrete or unique entities—in and of themselves more than as instances of general categories. I think history, literature, and art do this. One can only render the concrete or do justice to the unique to the extent that one comes at it from as many different disciplines as possible.

The same for publication: though it usually serves as the litmus test for whether “research” has taken place, it would be only slightly perverse to advance a contrary law: the value and significance of research relates inversely to how much immediate publication results. That is, if what you find out is important, quite a few people probably already knew it and someone has put it in print. There are exceptions of course—perhaps more in science. The law only holds up statistically. I don't espouse for a moment the obscurantist position that nothing really new is ever learned. But to the extent that we build a system which tries in a hothouse fashion to make all research into instances of novelty and exceptional breakthrough, we legislate the wasting of time and money. And the deadening of intellect.

Thus there need be no conflict between research and teaching—indeed they should complement each other. But only if research and teaching are not restricted to their present narrow models. “Research” must not mean only “research resulting in publication by an expert in his field.” “Teaching” must not mean only “teaching by an expert in a field of proven competence.” When research and teaching are narrowed down as at present, they do indeed conflict.

A teacher who engaged in the proposed sort of research-and-teaching would seem to have a busier teaching schedule than his colleagues who pursued the orthodox model. He would not necessarily have more classroom hours, but his new course would eat up all the time he normally spends on his own research. And he might, as a matter of fact, wish to spend more than the normal 100-150 minutes a week with this class since class meetings would be learning sessions for him too. He would be eager to spend
time exploring important issues with the others learning in the course. Class preparation and teaching would not be onerous duties working against the advancement of his career. He would be unifying teaching and research. This is not a model for all teachers, but rather a plea for more than one model of teaching and research. Those who pursue both sorts of research would be more likely to do so with integrity and full involvement rather than half-heartedly and cynically as so many do now. And research would be more likely in both cases to improve teaching. It would also bring into the profession many good researchers and teachers who find the present model too unenlightening.

Can higher education really pretend that it believes one of its favorite pieties—that majoring is valuable because if you master one discipline you can validly and autonomously learn in the others—when it operates by the premise that no one is qualified to teach a subject unless he has been professionally trained in it?

Is it more dangerous for a student to be confronted in the classroom with imperfect mastery, imperfect understanding, or even with erroneous assertions by the teacher—or for him to be left with no powerful desire to pursue the subject farther? The fact is that any teacher must display erroneous information or dubious ideas; such is the state of our knowledge and our minds; but the student who has been given genuine curiosity to pursue the subject will disabuse himself of these misconceptions through further study and through sensitivity to data in the area, while the student who is left inert will be left with his misconceptions permanent and hence genuinely dangerous. It is common for students to trust a teacher's command of his subject but not trust him as a person. Wouldn't the only healthy state of affairs be the other way around?

An eminent scholar and university president embodied the prevailing point of view about teaching and research in this assertion: “It is inconceivable that anyone could want to teach something and not also want to know more about some aspect of it than anyone else.” It seems at first like an irrefutable position, and the words can be glossed for profundity. But if we accept the implications about knowing and teaching that are produced by the fact that the statement was made in defense of the present model of teaching-and-research, we are bound to reach a different conclusion—that a man is unfit to teach a subject if his motivation is the desire to know more about some aspect of it than anyone else.

For the statement promotes the implication that when you know something well, what you know are things unknown to others—that is private to you, secret, arcane. This can be true in a sense—the data you work with in knowing something well may be information and ideas known to few. But the statement works against what needs emphasis: knowing, if it is not trivial, means understanding the characteristics of things, people, propositions, and even of the process itself of trying to understand; making progress in this direction involves finding out things that are known by more and more people.

The statement thus implies for knowing the psychological model of progressively separating oneself off from others—being alone: “Whew! It's lonely out here!” Rather than progressively joining oneself—through learning—with a company of others: “My God! All you people knew these things all this time and I am just finding them out? Why didn't you tell me? Ah, but I see—you've been telling me all along and I didn't understand.”

The statement also implies for knowing the “political” model of being king: carving out a territory of your own and having exclusive sway; a competitive model of knowing as beating others.

Even if these implications about know-
ing are inevitable—which I doubt—they should be supplemented by others. Alone, they leave no room for knowing as joining with others, diminishing separation, sharing in what is known.

The implications about teaching are even more troubling. A reluctance actually to share or reveal knowledge of a special field is seldom overt. But the sense of field as personal fiefdom is so strong in the world we inhabit that the hoarding instinct must operate in many covert ways. There exists a floating sense, for example, that only a weeded-out elect are worthy of one's private preserve—students who reveal special diligence or special intelligence. They must prove themselves by some sort of initiation. There is also a tendency to make special fields seem very complex and difficult to understand. Private or localized jargons also have the effect of preserving knowledge to the initiate. And though there seems no limit to the reasons for writing badly, one of them is relevant here: “I've got to write about………. OK, I'll do it; and I'll get it all down on the page. But just let them try to understand what I'm saying. I'll show them!”

I hear a scientist muttering, “Maybe those pieties about knowing fit the humanities, but in science we really do seek the genuinely new and private.” But though this may be true of information, I wonder if it is true of general ideas and the process of understanding—of making sense out of data.

On the other hand, scientists seem better at one kind of sharing than humanists—again because ego seems less obstructive where there are agreed-on rules of inference and evidence: does it really make sense that there are so few team research projects in literary criticism or other soft humanities? so few articles and books with more than one author? I admit that the laboratory model—a group of men coming together to try to solve one problem—seems alien in literature. But that very fact is troubling. More than one person is capable of reaching a conclusion about what a poem means or how it works, about a problem in philosophy or history. The conclusions reached by two or three persons thrashing the matter out together are more trustworthy than any reached alone. Not only can they cover more material, but the interplay between them can produce points of view and ideas that none is capable of alone—even if they read each other’s work. I wonder if the famous “loneliness of scholarship” is a necessary condition of good work. Perhaps it is an accident of the politics of our profession and the psychology of us attracted to it.

We have not in fact wandered from the first example or from our definitions of teaching. This alternative model of teaching and research would help not only the brilliant student. The only hope for the unskilled student we began with—who hated school and the course—is to give him a teacher who is trying to learn and who shares the process with the student. (Most teachers have noticed how often they teach a course best the first time they teach it.) If one rejects showing-up-with-the-goods as a definition of teaching and accepts producing-understanding instead, proposals like this one cannot be dismissed.

VI. Hardnosed and Softnosed Teaching

In this essay’s exploration of what is functional with a bad definition of teaching and what would be functional with a good one, I do not wish to make an oversimple implication about actual classroom techniques. For it may seem that everything here is a plea for “softnosed” teaching—giving lots of help—as against the “hardnosed” brand of giving very little. For hardnosed teaching—“letting them stand on their own two feet,” “not doing their work for them,” “treating them like adults,” etc.—would seem to be exactly the same as showing up with the goods. And softnosed teaching would
seem like bending all efforts to produce understanding. But the matter is not so neat.

Some of the trouble in higher education in fact comes from the way the two definitions of teaching seem to correspond to the two styles of teaching: the obvious value of hardnosed teaching leads teachers implicitly to allow showing-up-with-the-goods as a definition of teaching. For most teachers want their students not merely able to give the right answers on tomorrow's test, but rather to have sufficient understanding to deal intelligently with any material in the area of the course. This requires some autonomous learning in the student. He must make and explore connections on his own. But the student is apt to lack autonomy in learning when he arrives at college, and one of the best ways to produce it is simply to demand it: to give little enough guidance, help, and support that the student must himself develop this capacity to operate on his own. And so hardnosed teaching—which seems to be merely showing up with the goods—can be exactly what is needed to produce understanding.

We find here a familiar justification for lecture courses. It is argued that though students seem more active in a discussion course or seminar, a lecture course actually requires more initiative and autonomy: they are on their own—it's just them and the data and they've got to do something with it. The point can be true and important. A total curriculum of small classes and seminars can permit a student to remain passive and dependent. But there are better (and cheaper) ways to require autonomy than lectures which all too often simply fail to get students interested or highly productive. Why not demand that the student attain even greater autonomy before he graduates? Ask him to choose his topic of study; to define and focus it and work up bibliography—but give him some feedback here; and then ask him to do the work of the course on his own. Students could work up to these fully independent courses by way of ones a bit more directed and structured by a teacher—or ones in which students work as a team. The prior goal, however, is that the student have begun to learn, to be involved, and to be productive.

For if one slides into valuing hardnosed teaching in and for itself, one has fixated on a technique and forgotten the goal for which it was originally valued. A good teacher is always trying to be sensitive to those situations in which what is needed to produce understanding—even mature, autonomous understanding—is a great deal of help, structuring, and direction. It is an obvious fact that autonomy and independence are not always produced when the teacher simply demands them and provides little help; a teacher cannot validly say he seeks autonomy for all his students if hardnosed teaching is his only technique. Why should “holding their hand” be a concept that raises universal shudders or scorn if that activity, on occasion, is necessary to produce the teacher's goal? The phrase, of course, is usually felt as invidious, but honesty should teach us otherwise. It may be that a growing sophistication about teachers going to bed with their students will prepare the way for an unhysterical analysis of holding. Furthermore, autonomous performance—however important it is—is not a sufficient goal if that performance be shoddy, second rate, and lacking in understanding.

In short, the issue of hardnosed vs. softnosed teaching—whether the teacher gives very little or very much help—cannot be decided absolutely and in its own terms. It must be decided in each case in terms of which will better produce lasting, trustworthy understanding. The exploration of definitions of teaching in this essay implies on the one hand that the teacher cannot do his job by simply “giving” students something or
doing their work for them. But on the other hand, we have not uncovered any intrinsic reasons for limiting the amount of help a teacher should give students in the exceedingly difficult task of attaining for themselves autonomous understanding.

I wrote all of this before I realized it was no more than an extended gloss on a quotation from Heraclitus which I've long tried to keep in sight:

The learning of many things teaches not understanding.

Else it would have taught Hesiod and Pythogoras.

In the academic world we read him backwards. We try to emulate the exquisite ferocity of his put-down of colleagues before getting around to his wisdom about learning.