

Reforming All the Time

Recuperating the Tradition of the Active Mind for Teacher Education

Educational structures are more in flux now than they have been in recent memory, Mr. Bickman notes, and before they freeze into new rigidities and simplicities, there may be a chance to restore thinking — the continual act of mind — as the central activity of our schooling.

BY MARTIN BICKMAN

IN AN article that appeared in the September 1998 issue of the *Kaplan*, I argued that genuine school reform can happen not through any change imposed from above but only through the consistent application of intelligence and steady thinking, by teachers and students, day by day, class by class.¹ I traced a current of thought in American intellectual history that I call the tradition of the active mind, beginning with Bronson Alcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson, elaborated more fully by pragmatic philosophers, most centrally John Dewey, and flowering in the best work of the 1960s and 1970s by writers such as John Holt and George Dennison. This tradition has struggled continually — and most often unsuccessfully — with the forces of bureaucratization, authoritarianism, and social control. But it has been realized in small and temporary triumphs, such as Alcott's Temple School, Dewey's laboratory school at the University of Chicago, and Dennison's First Street School.

In short, the tradition of the active mind views knowledge as provisionally constructed by the mind in perpetual interaction with the world. The outcomes of this process are generally cultural artifacts such as ideas, classifications, formulas, and works of literature and the other arts — basically a body of knowledge that has been organized and divided as the curriculum. The

worst mistake of conventional education is to overvalue and make fetishes of only these end products, merely handing them over ready-made instead of involving students in the process of reconstructing the world for themselves, of engaging in dialectical movements between experiencing and conceptualizing, acting and thinking, practice and theory. In trying to recuperate the tradition of the active mind, then, we should move toward a pedagogy that we would now term more constructivist, more student-centered, more metacognitive, one that engages students more as culture-creating agents than as vessels for the reception of culture.

In my previous article, space precluded me from extending the implications of my historical analysis more directly to the immediate task of school reform. To budge even a little a system as glacially inert as that in which we find ourselves is a complex and multifaceted problem, and many people will have to exert force on as many places as possible. But if my analysis is valid, the best place to focus reform efforts is where the rubber hits the road: the classroom itself. Moreover, the most promising point at which to break the vicious circle of mindless self-replication is the education of teachers. Teachers need to be given the confidence, the freedom, and the resources that are necessary to make those immediate adjustments to each class and student. Only in this way will we really transform schooling. Teachers should be encouraged to join with their students in a pedagogical alliance founded on self-

reflection and openness that will “re-form” every educational situation.

To begin conceptualizing this process, let us return to John Dewey. Dewey began to notice that his own ideas were being seriously weakened, even undermined, by the way they were being taught to teachers:

The drive of established institutions is to assimilate and distort the new into conformity with themselves. . . . In teachers colleges and elsewhere the ideas and principles have been converted into a fixed subject matter of ready-made rules, to be taught and memorized according to certain standardized procedures and, when occasion arises, to be applied to educational problems externally, the way mustard plasters, for example, are applied.²

In other words, there was a fatal disconnect between medium and message, an ironic mismatch that Dewey had described as early as 1916:

Why is it, in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by passive absorption, are universally condemned, that they are still so entrenched in practice? That education is not an affair of “telling” and being told, but an active and constructive process, is a principle almost as generally violated in practice as conceded in theory. Is not this deplorable situation due to the fact that the doctrine itself is merely told? It is preached; it is lectured; it is written about.³

Unfortunately, the situation is no better today. Schools of education most often adopt constructivist, student-centered approaches as their explicit orthodoxy, but they present these very ideas primarily through “frontal lecturing” by the instructor, along with the usual apparatus of textbooks, paper-and-pencil exams, and letter grades. I became particularly aware of this situation at my own university after several students said to me, “You know that stuff they talk about over at the ed school? Well, you actually do it!”

Dewey was astute enough to see that

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beginning teachers will not teach in ways in which they have not themselves effectively and enjoyably learned. They will rarely adopt an approach because they are *told* it will work. Dewey not only diagnosed this problem of what we might call the “enactment gap” in teacher training but also offered specific suggestions for improvement. In a 1904 article titled “The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education,” Dewey distinguished the apprentice model of teacher education from the laboratory model. The former aims to produce as efficiently as possible new teachers to fit into the existing system. As its name implies, it consists of a beginner, an apprentice, who takes direction from a master teacher, watches what that teacher does, and tries to replicate it. If this approach sounds familiar, it should. It is the model most widely in use in what we think of as “student teaching.”

Opposed to this notion is the laboratory model, which asks beginners not to focus so much on the techniques of teachers but to concentrate instead on the entire process of learning. Children are to be observed at least as much as the teacher. In a rare burst of eloquence, Dewey argued: “The student should not be observing to find out how the good teacher does it, in order to accumulate a store of methods by which he also may teach successfully. He should rather observe with reference to seeing the interaction of mind, to see how teacher and pupils react upon each other — how mind answers to mind.”⁴ Although Dewey does not say so explicitly, he is really advocating a kind of Copernican shift in the entire frame of reference for teacher education — from teacher performance and methodology to how students actually learn. The apprentice model seems to turn out functioning teachers more quickly, but those teachers seem to lack the ability to keep learning. Their “immediate skill” may be purchased at “the cost of power to go on growing.” Indeed, Dewey continues, “Such persons seem to know how to teach, but they are not students of teaching.”⁵

Probably the aspect of apprentice teaching that most troubled Dewey is that it posits the classroom as a realm hermetically sealed from the way we learn outside it, from what he often calls “the continuity of experience.” The apprentice model does not ask the beginning teacher to draw on self-reflections as to how he

or she has learned and is learning but stresses routine mechanical methods:

Just because the student’s attention is not brought to the point of recognizing that his own past and present growth is proceeding in accordance with the very laws that control growth in the school, and that there is no psychology of the schoolroom different from that of the nursery, the playground, the street, and the parlor, he comes unconsciously to assume that education in the classroom is a sort of unique thing having its own laws. . . . Hence he comes to believe in the potency for schoolroom purposes of materials, methods, and devices which it never occurs to him to trust to in his experience outside school.⁶

The laboratory method, by contrast, fosters not only self-reflection but an independence of thought that asks the beginning teacher to understand as much as possible about the learning situation and to respond to the classroom situation primarily in light of this understanding. Dewey asks the beginning teacher to focus “upon the internal, not upon the external.” When one observer pressed him about the apparent chaos of his own laboratory school, Dewey’s response was to defend it not as the optimum learning situation but as a necessary phase in learning how students learn: “Doubtless the school was overweighted, especially in its earlier years, on the ‘individualistic’ side in consequence of the fact that in order to get data upon which we could act, it was necessary to give too much liberty of action rather than to impose too much restriction.”⁷

To apply Dewey’s ideas more directly to our current situation in teacher education, I want to escort readers along the more concrete route of my attempts to enact those ideas in two courses I have taught. The first is an undergraduate course titled “The Experience of Education,” not intended so much to produce future teachers as to help students become more reflective about the learning they are immediately undergoing in the interest of enriching and improving that learning. The primary text for this course is the students’ own journals, in which they monitor and articulate their learning in the light of readings and class discussions. I want students to experience writing as a way of clarifying thought, of fixing it for a while so it can be examined, reflected upon, and extended. To this end, we use

Ann Berthoff’s idea of the “dialectical notebook,” in which students write on one side of the page and use the other to make later connections and observations, putting the mind in conversation with itself.⁸

In this course, students are asked to view the activities in their other courses through metacognitive spectacles, to observe the structures and processes of their own education as well as the content. But we also create shared learning situations within our own classroom and analyze them. In one such case, I adopted an idea from Eleanor Duckworth and asked the students to figure out why and how the moon has phases.⁹ But the equipment I had brought in as manipulatives to help us — flashlights, balls of various sizes — was not up to the task. With just a minute of class time left, we were still puzzled and frustrated. Then one of the students suddenly exclaimed, “Just look at everybody’s face!”

We were sitting around a circular table in a room with windows on only one wall, and, according to our positions, the shading on our faces corresponded to the different appearances of the moon, with the student directly facing the windows as the full moon, the one facing directly away from the windows as the new moon, and the rest of us as all the gradations between. The student had created a wonderful analogy between faces and phases, and the analogy was enriched by the circumstance that as we looked at the physical light on one another we could also see the figurative light of understanding break out as the idea “dawned” on us. My university gives out teaching awards, but what struck me then was how much more appropriate learning awards would be.

The second course I try to conduct in the spirit of Dewey’s laboratory model is titled “Theory and the Teaching of Literature,” and it focuses specifically on teacher education.¹⁰ This graduate class team-teaches an introductory undergraduate course in literature and then meets for the next hour to analyze what happened in light of theories about learning and reading and to plan the next classes with this analysis in mind. The graduate students are asked to create and execute their own teaching methods and to observe what happens in the classroom, not so much in terms of teacher performance but in terms of what we can see about how the undergraduates learn. We not only observe the classroom itself — sometimes even using videotape — but also close-

ly analyze the informal and formal writing that the undergraduates produce. This lends a certain intellectual interest to what is often the deadly experience of reading student writing, especially when this is done only for evaluative purposes or with the intention of “correcting” it. The entire undergraduate class, then, becomes the main text for the graduate class.

One thing I notice about both of these classes — and this has wide implications for teacher education — is that, by involving students in an experiential situation, more conventional academic activities such as reading and writing take on a much greater immediacy and intensity. In both courses I have found that I can quickly dispense with letter grades, while in my more traditional courses I need to keep them as a kind of self-defense against the competing demands of the students’ other courses and commitments. Furthermore, in these two courses, the students become much more creative and active. Soon, they are the ones bringing in readings for the entire class and suggesting what we should do and when. Sometimes this spirit spills over into activism beyond the confines of the course itself, as when one group of students in “The Experience of Education” wrote up a plan for improving the learning structures at our campus and invited the university president to the class to hear them out. And students in the graduate course report that it is the first time that the different parts of their lives — scholarship, criticism, learning, and teaching — come together in meaningful ways.

These experiences, then, convince me that we should not simply add more experiential components to teacher education. Instead, we need to use care and imagination in integrating these with more academic work. We are so used to thinking only by the course unit that we simply pile the brick of student teaching on top of the brick of social foundations on top of the brick of educational psychology, in the blind (and usually misplaced) faith that they will all come together in the student’s mind. And yet if we ourselves do not model synergistic ways in which all this learning comes together, why should we expect students to be able to do it on their own? We need to make teacher education at once more practical and more intellectual by showing in concrete detail how one relates to the other.

One possible model is PROBE, a prob-

lem-based teacher education program that has been discontinued at my own university.¹¹ All students in this program do their practice teaching concurrently with academic work, and the academic work is integrated with supervision in tutorial groups. One of the first decisions made by the PROBE planners was to eliminate all courses in the regular teacher education program and to substitute small tutorial groups in their place. Of course, this meant that in many cases the tutor/professor would not be an expert in the many topics to be dealt with in the case studies and so would be forced into the role of generalist and facilitator rather than expert lecturer. The tutor becomes a model of the self-directed learner and problem solver rather than the expositor of a font of knowledge, as is commonly the case in regular university classrooms.¹²

By all accounts the program was successful and sparked few of the complaints heard about the traditional teacher education program, such as intellectual flabbiness or cookie-cutter methodology. One conservative aspect of the program, though, was that, after some experimentation, the designers decided to restrict the program to those over the age of 25 who also had some teaching experience. While this was obviously in response to specific problems, it seems to me that the best remedy for lack of maturity and experience would have been more guided experience within the program itself. By the designers’ own reasoning, if the program makes sense for students with some experience, it makes even more sense for those with no experience. For the sake of having this particular program succeed, they were condemning more students to the traditional teacher education model that they criticized so forcefully.

One of the most deadening aspects of the traditional model is the element of pre-fabrication; syllabi are constructed prescribing daily readings before a student even enters the door. And that reading is also pre-fabricated in textbooks, those weighty tombstones that more often mark the death of thinking than provide a genuine intellectual experience as they boil down the shifting, protean play of mind of writers like Plato, Emerson, and even Dewey into the print equivalent of sound bites. The textures and specific qualities that enrich and distinguish each act of thought become homogenized into a single bland pudding.

The single most significant change that

I would advocate from the perspective of the tradition of the active mind subsumes all the others: give more freedom and responsibility to students who are in the process of learning to teach. If we are to trust them very soon with the education of our children, we should ask them from the beginning to reflect on their own learning processes and to structure their own education as teachers accordingly.

Of course, it is true, as Robert Frost says, that there is a “book side” to everything and that many of us elders know books and concepts that will help beginners. We need not throw students into a Summerhilleian nightmare, but we should be responsive and learned enough to suggest readings that speak to genuine problems and concerns arising from their classrooms at the appropriate times. This kind of individualized and small-group guidance is, of course, labor intensive, but perhaps we can borrow the time from what we would have spent standing and delivering conventional lectures. Instead of trying to convince these students that we have already solved the problems of education and that all they have to do is learn the solutions, we can model a more open-ended and collaborative approach. In sum, we would do well to keep in mind the words of George Denison as we try to help our teachers learn:

We cannot organize the educational event in advance. Certainly we can plan and prepare, but we cannot organize it until we are in it and the students themselves have brought their unique contributions. And so there is a point beyond which our tendency to organize becomes inimical to experience, inimical to teaching. Much that belongs to teaching precisely as a profession is therefore inimical to teaching. Yet just this tendency to organize and to elevate the gratifications of the profession — the status of expertise, the pleasures of jargon, the pride of method — is composed largely of two things, both inescapably human and hard to transcend: anxiety and vanity.¹³

To say all of this, of course, is not to resolve or solve anything in itself but to suggest a series of beginnings, a variety of complex challenges that need to be faced. There are those who will immediately reject these ideas in the face of such “practical” obstacles as state licensing requirements. But if we do not have general aims to pursue in the first place, there will nev-

er be even the slightest movement toward the use of more intelligence in teacher education. Furthermore, we should think of ourselves as educators not just of the young but of the entire society, including legislators, boards of education, superintendents, and union leaders. Educational structures are more in flux now than they have been in recent memory, and before they freeze into new rigidities and simplicities, there may be a chance to restore thinking — the continual act of mind — as the central activity of our schooling.

1. Martin Bickman, "Thinking Toward Utopia: Reconstructing the Tradition of the Active Mind," *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1998, pp. 75-78.

2. Quoted in Elsie Clapp, *The Use of Resources in Education* (New York: Harper, 1952), pp. ix, x.

3. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), vol. 9, pp. 43-44.

4. John Dewey, "The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education," in *John Dewey on Education: Selected Writings*, ed. Reginald Archambault (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 323.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 320-21.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

7. John Dewey, "The Chicago Experiment," in Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1936), pp. 467-68.

8. Ann E. Berthoff, "Dialectical Notebooks and the Audit of Meaning," in Toby Fulwiler, ed., *The Journal Book* (Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton/Cook, 1987),

pp. 11-18.

9. Eleanor Duckworth, *The Having of Wonderful Ideas and Other Essays on Teaching and Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1987).

10. The history, rationale, and practice of this course are described in my article "Teaching Teaching: Construction and Reflection in the Classroom," *Reader: Essays in Reader-Oriented Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy*, Spring/Fall 1995, pp. 85-102.

11. This program has been described in detail by two of its leaders. See Richard J. Kraft and John D. Haas, "PROBE: Problem-Based Teacher Education at the University of Colorado, Boulder," in Joseph L. DeVitis and Peter A. Sola, eds., *Building Bridges for Educational Reform* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989), pp. 161-78.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 172-73.

13. George Dennison, *The Lives of Children: The Story of the First Street School* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 258. **K**

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