ODYSSEUS AT THE UNIVERSITY: A DIALOGUE ON TEACHING IN COLLEGE

KEITH D. STEPHENSON

Questioner: It has been said that the university professors know nothing about education. Is this true?

Professor: It's true in one sense at least. Compared to elementary and secondary teachers, university teachers usually have had little or no training in pedagogy, the art of teaching. When I was working on my master's degree, I had one course in "Teaching and Research in Religion." It met for one hour per week for one semester. In my doctoral program, there was a non-credit course which involved a series of chats with university professors about their fields and ways of teaching. Comparing my "training" in the techniques of teaching with other professors, I seem to have been overtrained: two courses to the usual one or none.

Q: Why aren't professors trained to teach?

P: Preparation for university teaching involves earning the master's and doctoral degrees in one of the areas of university study. These are academic degrees; that is, studying an area for understanding alone. Professional degrees, such as master's and doctorates in education, medicine, religion, etc. prepare one to practice in that field. But, out of the necessity to gain as full an understanding of the field as possible, preparation for college teaching usually involves little time for training in the practice of teaching.

Q: Isn't this lack of training in teaching a drawback?

P: Perhaps not. Most university professors that I know are deeply concerned about the problems of effective teaching. Pedagogy is an avocation, a hobby, if not a vocation. This means that they are continually wrestling with the problem of how to teach best.

Although some professors prepared their lectures for the first year they taught, and have not changed a word, a gesture or a joke since, many others find each semester that last year's notes and plans don't seem to fit this year's classes. So it's back to the drawing board.

Q: Why is this? Why does the professor continually re-do his classroom procedures?

P: One of the reasons is that, in addition to getting older, he is getting wiser. Well, at least he is discovering new things. He is reading works by other scholars and doing his own research. When he

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finds something that excites him, he wants to share the excitement. When he finds something that looks good, he wants to try it out, to put it on for size and to stretch the shoulders to see if it will hold or if it will split at the seams.

Q: Are you saying that students see their professors struggling with new ideas as well as teaching their old, firm convictions?

P: It depends, of course, on the professor and the class. I personally believe that learning makes great teaching. For example, as a student, one of my professors always lectured, but his lectures were breathtaking in insight and the range of exciting possibilities. I asked him how he prepared for us. He answered, "First, I imagine myself sitting as a student in the front row. Then I try to teach me everything I want to know about the subject." His teaching was exciting partly because he was showing us his own exhilarating work and thought.

Q: Since you said that pedagogy was the hobby of many professors, I am guessing that their reading and conversations on pedagogy also cause them to revamp their teaching. Right?

P: Of course. A couple of years ago, for example, the American Academy of Religion, a national association of professors in religion, in each of its six regiional meetings, brought in a half-dozen master teachers who spoke of the ways they taught their favorite or most original courses. These sessions were the best attended and most discussed of the entire program. Apparently the average professor rejoices in this kind of experience almost as much as in finding a parking space.

Q: So, a professor's teaching changes in response to new discoveries in his subject area, and to new developments in pedagogy. Anything else?

P: Well, it depends on the person. For myself, the greatest changes have come in response to changes in students and student expectations. A colleague recently summarized the last 25 years of college education as that kind of give and take. He said, "When we came to college, we expected the professors to provide us with answers. They did. No one asked the questions, though. I don't think anyone knew what the questions were. We, in turn, began teaching the same way. Then in the 60's, the students discovered the questions that we had the answers to. It was a decade of great teaching – students and professors together discovering the relevance of our civilization's collective knowledge. Now it's different. The students don't have the questions and we can't go back to giving answers to questions no one is asking, like we did in the 50's. What do we do now?"

Q: Since I, too, came out of the education of the early 50's I'm curious about your friend's description of it as giving answers to questions that were yet to be asked. The time-honored lecture was this, I guess. But how come some of those one-way questionless answer periods were so meaningful?

P: As I remember the most exciting classes, the method worked because the professors and the students were together a community dedicated to the pursuit of ideas. An idea was valuable for no other reason than that it was an idea. Once tried to comprehend an idea for the same reason Leigh-Mallory tried to climb Everest: "Because it's there." We were all "philosophers" in the ancient, non-professional sense: we "loved wisdom".

Q: And out of this community of learning came young scholars, right? At least those who did "best" in the classes went on to become professors.

P: What would you expect? They had learned to feel at home in the water. So they stayed in it. I remember, for example, the first class I taught in theology. I had come fresh from a graduate course in contemporary theologians ,excited by all the new ideas and systems. It was a small class but great bunch of students. Many were taking their first course in theological thought. Well, of those in that class whose careers I've followed, one is a minister's wife, one a minister, one a professor of theology, two headed to seminary but later turned aside, one to become a professor of English literature and the other to become a professor sociology. That class was a community of people who loved and still love ideas. The chase was the thing.

Then, in a couple of years, the pursuit of ideas for their own dear sake was dumped.

Q: And the age of relevance dawned?

P: Yes, the students first discovered that there was a world out there, a world of dying. Perhaps we should say, a world of murder. Cain killing his brother – in the streets, in the school systems, in the markets, in the neighborhoods and churches. From the cities came a cry for social justice. The students heard it and came to the professors and others with the questions. What we discovered, to our great excitement, was that they were asking the questions that we and our predecessors had been giving the answers to all along.

The major difference then—and it was a considerable one—was that the questions came first. They had to be heard, and heard rightly. Then the richness of the old liberal tradition was searched and there were the answers. They were not always clear. Usually they were set in archaic terminology and images. But they were there. Continued

dialogue with the students clarified, tested and updated them. The classorom had become a workshop for society.

Q: And the students who graduated from the classrooms – they were not the lovers of ideas, going on into a full-time, professional quest of the Holy Grail of Wisdom. Rather they were on a crusade to win back, even if necessary to create, the Holy City.

P: Exactly. My students, at least many of them, did not graduate. They were around for a year or two and would disappear. After a while, they would drop in with stories of the Peace Corps, VISTA, an inner-city parish, with tales of Chicago's violence, of occupying the ROTC building, of voter registration drives and peace strikes. They recommended this book and that periodical. They were concerned about my education. This was not condescension on their parts. They were simply continuing what had gone on before: the mutual give and take out of which came a program for action. They believed that one had to have the right questions to get the right answers. You had to have the best counter-answers to test and develop your own.

Q: You make it sound as if this was the blossoming of liberal learning, the harvest of generations of work and preparation. Was is?

P: Clearly it was exciting and rewarding in an immediate and immense way. This finding old answers to new questions did happen, at times, but most of the time we only hoped we were doing that. In reality, we were often flying from crisis to crisis and opportunity to opportunity like the old barn-storming pilots did – by the seat of our pants.

Q: What the latter-day critics said of this movement for social reform was often true, then? That it had no theological-philosophical underpinnings?

P: Yes. In the rush and activism we often failed to consult the answers that we had in our traditions. We encouraged the improvident planning of those who had not yet met the old masters. I confess, for my part, I often failed to acquaint them with the men in my field: Moses, Paul, Augustine and Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, Barth and Bonhoeffer.

But not all of the time. Sometimes the traditions were there. They were just traveling with new clothes, incognito. The concepts were there but the language had changed. Instead of the terminology of the Church Fathers it was the language of the social sciences; instead of original sin it was institutional racism; instead of guilt it was corporate irresponsibility; instead of divine essence it was advocacy.

But even here we did not do as well as we should have. There was in the movement a naïvité that our traditions could have avoided.

The day of social change now seems over, and the professors, as the voices of tradition, are partly to blame.

Q: If that day has set, what new day has dawned? What new kind of students are the teachers responding to now?

P: That is a puzzle that is difficult to solve. Perhaps we are standing too close to it. Perhaps, as I believe, the puzzle is a complex of many puzzles.

Rabbi Arnold Wolf, a chaplain at Yale, has described modern students in a way that strikes me as sound, if not all-inclusive. He says that the last few years has proved the powerlessness of most of us, and especially of the students. The old awareness of need combined with this sense of impotency has produced a massive "down" in these kids. The world is not only unredeemed but unredeemable. It has gone sour. For example, students confess that they have no heroes or heroines, except perhaps those who articulate their psychic suffering.

The response of students to this "down" is to search for a way out of this unmanagable world into a smaller, simpler and more controllable one. This search has taken, I believe, two quite different forms. The earliest which is still with us, was to turn to gurus and masters who can deliver some kind of other-worldly bliss.

Q: An example of this trend would be, I assume, Rennie Davis, the radical of the late 60's, who became the leading devotee of the young Satguru Maharaji, the Perfect Master of Divine Light.

P: Exactly. But it is noteworthy that many students have turned to less esoteric persons, like professors! As Wolf comments, students have begun asking teachers to do more (or is it less?) than teach.

Q: Why do you feel that this is less than teaching? I thought that ideal education was Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other.

P: But this new venture is not the disciplined quest for learning. It is more like moths being gathered to a flame. The guru becomes for the students the absolute center of a new world; he becomes literally their master. This situation is self-satisfying to everyone. But in that situation, the radius of the students' lives becomes appallingly short; the range of their experiences is incredibly limited. That is, the new world is an escape from the real world. Furthermore, moths circling about a flame are inevitably killed or at least crippled by the flame.

Q: Let's pursue that analogy a bit. I detect from it that you believe that teaching should free students; that it ought not only to cut them free from bondage to prejudices and perspectives, but also to set

them loose in the pursuit of their own intellectual self-development. And the master-disciple relationship fails to effect that freedom.

P: Surely freedom is of cardinal importance. But teaching should not only free, but also unite; it should unite persons with the rest of humanity, past, present and future. It should make students a part of the world, the real world in its fullness and complexity. Exciting as a group dance about a flame may be, it separates persons from, rather than unites them with the world.

Q: If the quest for a master or a guru is the first of the expressions of the quest for a simpler, more controllable world, what is the second, as you see it?

P: It seems on the surface to have little in common with the first. It is to be found among the "non-nonsense" students who say, "I'm here because it is required in the professional field I want to get into; let's get on with it."

Q: So you are saying that the diligent quest for nothing less than A minuses is not necessarily the quest for education; that the devoted pre-professional, like the guru's students, is in bondage to a limited and unreal world; that he is neither free, nor in unity with those outside his profession.

P: Precisely, and teachers must not let themselves be pressured into limiting education to this kind of activity. It is a great temptation. We are often so desperate for student interest in the course, that we mistake "desire to know" for "desire to understand." The Charybdis of professional requirements is no less dangerous to the skiff of education than the Scilla of subjective views and opinions.

Q: But surely the teacher should respond to student's needs in some positive way. You yourself said earlier that the changes in your own teaching have come in response to students and student expectations.

P: And that is still the case. And what I have begun to see is perhaps the culmination of the experiences of those many changes. The teacher must respond to student needs, but he must do this by tying their needs to the world about them. He must make clear where and how reality impinges upon their needs. Most people create escapist worlds. Teachers need not destroy those worlds – the old professors used to speak of "cleaning out the Augean stables" – but they must tie those worlds to "things as they are," and make sure that the tie remains unsevered. Or as Daniel Day Williams said: "Great teaching can be measured by the spaceousness of the spiritual-intellectual room in which the student is brought to move". This, as I see it, is the purpose of the study of history, of the sciences, of literature and of religion.

Q: How does a teacher increase the size of the room in which the student moves?

P: By dialogue with those who move, or have moved, in the same room. We all like to imagine that we are Columbus discovering a new world—the first to explore a new area. With this conceit we wander repeatedly into the errors of our fathers, we fail to take advantage of the gains they won, and we become easily contented with our modest efforts. Dialogue, or as Tacitus said, "praiseworthy competition" with our forebears, prevents that. I am convinced that one of the reasons Brahms wrote great music was that, as he said, he always heard such a giant (Beethoven) marching behind him. That is the task of a teacher: to encourage students' efforts in a field by enabling them to hear the tread of the giants behind them.

Q: But what of those students who do not even know that they are in any room at all; the freshmen types of all ages and stages who feel that they couldn't dialogue with others because they have nothing to contribute? And what of their brothers; those who know well the room in which they move nothing else, and want to know nothing else; the sophomores of all ages who feel they couldn't dialogue with others because others have nothing to contribute to them? How does one enable either type to engage in dialogue?

P: It is easier to say what is not to be done. The teacher must not show the student the walls of his room; especially, as we are so easily tempted, to show him how narrow his room is and how cracked its walls are! How, on the other hand, can the teacher enable the student to recognize that he operates within a given framework and encourage him to clarify it by dialogue with the masters? That demands all the pedagogic skills we have.

I have found that a series of open-ended writing assignments often helps. Asking them to clarify first what kind of problems are bothering them or their friends. Then asking them to discuss the resources they have for dealing with their problems. Then directing them to one of the classics in the area and asking them to clarify the resources it provides. And finally asking them to engage in a mutual evaluation, a dialogue which evaluates and criticizes each set of resources.

Q: And yet, valuable as such assignments may be, my experience with great teachers suggests that another element, quite different, is required. Someone, I've forgotten who, said that a good teacher is some one who is a real human being, living in front of the students; who demonstrates to them a distinct way of being in the world. And

often students catch that way of living, just as once they caught mumps and measles.

If that is so, then teaching is demonstrating before students the excitement of involvement in the present through dialogue with the masters. Students watch, with glee (!) the teacher trying to keep ahead of the giants.

P: That is what teaching ought to be. I'm not sure that is what my teaching is. There may be moments like that. I hope so.