IV Ten Minutes a Day

People who have been students in authoritarian classrooms cannot expect themselves to develop their own open classrooms easily. I started out as an authoritarian teacher. It was the only way I knew to teach; the way I had been taught. It took several years before I was able to function in a freer environment. Indeed, the students were much more ready for freedom than their teacher was. Perhaps it was better to start tentatively than to pretend that a change had come over me suddenly, and to try to turn everything upside down in the classroom. My beliefs in a free, non-authoritarian classroom always ran ahead of my personal ability to teach in one.

There are several ways to experiment in the classroom. It depends upon who the teacher is. One ought not to try something basically incompatible with one's personality. It is likely to cause frustration and hostility, and to make further experimentation seem more dangerous than it really is. A crucial thing to realize is that changing the nature of life in the classroom is no less difficult than changing one's own personality, and every bit as dangerous and time-consuming. It is also as rewarding.

The starting point of change is discontent. If you are perfectly content with an authoritarian style of teaching and pleased with your pupil's lives in the classroom there, an attempt to change will be pointless. Some of the best authoritarian teachers, often charming and brilliant people who succeed in persuading young people to perform what the school demands and to like it at the same time, may find change irrelevant.

If, on the other hand, the authoritarian mode is distressing—if being an unquestioned authority is too difficult and unpleasant a role to sustain, if the boredom of your pupils or the irrelevance of what they are learning distresses you, then perhaps other approaches should be tried. Before doing so you should try to think as honestly as you can about your teaching experience and try to articulate to yourself or a friend what it is that makes you want to change. It also may be of use to remember yourself as a pupil in school—to think back to your early experiences of frustration, joy, anxiety, learning, boredom in the classroom. I found that my memories of school helped me to avoid doing hateful things to my pupils that my teachers had done to me. This isn't to say that you will be able to make a list of all that's troubling you. But it is a good way to begin perceiving the classroom as a

place where strong and interesting experiences take place, rather than one where the objective performances of students are measured

One way to begin a change is to devote tea-minutes a day to doing something different. There is never any problem of finding ten minutes to play with, since what thepupils '"must cover" is usually padded in order to fill up time. During that ten minutes present the class with a number of things they can choose to do. Present them with options you feel may interest them. Allow them the option of sitting and doing nothing if they choose. Moreover, make it clear that nothing done during that period will be graded, and nothing need be shown or explained to the teacher. Those ten minutes is to be their time and is to be respected as such. Step out of the way and observe the things your pupils choose to do.

Step out of the way, but don't disappear. Make it clear that you won't tell people what to do or how to do it, but that you will be available to help in any way you can, or just to talk. For ten minutes cease to be a teacher and be an adult with young people, a resource available if needed, and possibly a friend, but not a director, a judge, or an executioner. Also try to make it possible for the ten minutes to grow to fifteen, twenty, so long as it makes sense to you and your pupils. It is not unlikely that those ten minutes may become the most important part of the day, and after a while may even become the school day.

Some specific hints on the use of the ten minutes:

—in English class it is possible to read, write (set three or four themes and leave it open for students to develop other ones), talk, act.

—in mathematics the students can set problems, solve problems, build computers, compute, design buildings (or other structures or things), talk about money, set problems for each other and the teacher.

—in social studies it is possible to talk about history; about newspapers, events, people; write about them; compose or listen to poems, play songs about them; talk or invite people in to talk about what's happening. —in all classes students can do nothing, gossip, write, start a newspaper, a newsletter, listen to music, dance, talk about or play games, bring in things that may interest the teacher or other students and talk about them, write about them.

Think about what is happening during those ten minutes and learn to be led by the

students. If certain things are particularly interesting to one group, find out about those things, learn as much as you can, and, seeing their interest, present them with ways of getting more deeply into what they care about. If, for example, a group of students is interested in animals and their relationship to people, you can refer them to fables, to Konrad Lorenz, to experimental psychology, to whatever you can discover yourself. And if you don't know about such matters find someone who does, and invite him to class to meet your pupils. Then — and this is crucial—step out of the way again. Do not insist that because you have uncovered all these new options for your students that they *must* pursue them. Maintain your own freedom from the authoritarian mode and help.

It is always a good idea to bring as many non-teachers into your classroom as possible. Painters, writers, businessmen, journalists all have valuable experience to offer young people that teachers don't have. So do people who have no specific vocations to talk about. Your students maintain their freedom, however modest it may be. Learn, though it is difficult, to allow your students to say "No" to what you want them to learn no matter how much stake you have in it. This means that one must understand one's own stake in making young people learn what one wants them to learn and not take it over seriously. Teachers must develop a sense of what they look like to young people and understand

how pointless and even funny it can seem to young people to see adults losing their cool over someone's refusal to take the division of fractions or the imagery in Act I of Macbeth seriously.

Opening Out

In public schools learning is supposed to take place within the classroom. Occasionally a class takes a supervised trip to a museum, a library, or a ball game. These experiences, however, are considered secondary to "real" learning, which consists of reading books, looking at educational material (films, models of machines, etc.), and listening to the teacher. I remember taking my sixth- grade class out of school two days a week. We walked around the community, visited factories, the university, artists' studios, chemical laboratories, film studios, people's houses, supermarkets, furniture stores, etc. Many other teachers at the school felt that our trips were not educational, and that we were leaving school so that I could avoid doing "real" teaching and the students could avoid submitting to "real" learning.

But the trips were a vital part of our experience together. We saw some of the world, talked to people, got a sense of the environments in which different types of work are done, and in a few places made friends and set up after-school programs for the students. The kids got a sense of what adults do with their time and a feel for possible careers for themselves.

Not everything we saw was pleasant. We went to court, the welfare department, the police department, the children's shelter. We hung around and watched and recorded the ways that our society deals with people. And when we returned to class we had things to talk about and study in depth. We compared, for example, our impressions of factory work, with the one presented in the school's vocational guidance manual. We talked of justice as we saw it work against poor and black people in the courts and as the civics textbook explained it.

Visits are valuable, but they are limited. First impressions are often misleading. I feel that it would be a very good thing if young people could spend time as apprentices to artiste, technicians, businessmen, etc. They could also be participant observers in places of work, and plan some of their program in the classroom around their experiences away from the school. This year some of my students will spend time at a TV studio, a design workshop, a boutique, a highway construction job, a laboratory, and at several departments of the University of California.

Schools are afraid to let their students go into the world away from the critical eye of the teacher. It won't be easy to leave the school several times a week with the class, much less develop apprenticeships for individual students away from the school building. However, you can move slowly, and should get as much help from the kids' parents as possible. Visit where they work, get to know the neighborhood you teach in. Ask the kids to tell you what's happening and to take you places. If there are places they feel you shouldn't know about, don't press.

The whole community ought to be the school, and the classroom a home base for the teachers and kids, a place where they can talk and rest and learn together, but not the sole place of learning. The classroom ought to be a communal center, a comfortable

environment in which plans can be made and experiences assessed. However one can open up the classroom as much by moving out of it as by changing the life within it.

Note: Increasingly, people are abandoning the public schools as hopeless. They have been setting up schools in storefronts, parks, homes, and factories. These schools use the community much more than do the public schools. There are many people around who care about the young and are delighted to give their time and energy. They are not "professional" teachers and therefore would have a difficult time finding places in public schools. They do things like make films, or paint or write poems, or build houses and highways, design and manufacture machines, deal with human relations or with marketing products. Often they will be delighted to come into the classroom and will invite kids to visit them at their work.

It is important for teachers to seek out people who do things and bring them into the classroom. It's not so hard—often all that is necessary is to go to a place, announce that one is a teacher, and invite people to come to class and meet the kids. There are, however, school administrators who will resist visitors they can't completely control. In these cases it may make sense to invite people anyway and not tell anybody. The more adults the kids get to know, the more easily they can move in a world which is still, after all, largely controlled by adults.

Reference

Kohl, Herbert R.. *The open classroom: a practical guide to a new way of teaching*. London: Methuen, 19691971. Print.