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ARTISTRY IN TEACHING

Sheila Fitzgerald

Even though it has been many years since I taught in elementary schools, I have vivid memories of experiences I had in teaching, experiences that taught me that learning often does not happen in the systematic, carefully planned, step-by-step methods we have come to value too highly in education. For example, one year I spent many days struggling with six third grade boys who couldn't seem to understand regrouping in subtraction. I had used every technique in my repertoire to get the idea across that ten ones made up one ten, that if you were short of ones when trying to subtract seven from twenty-three, you could regroup twenty-three into one ten and thirteen ones and complete your problem. Nothing seemed to work. They couldn't get it; there was no possibility of going on. Certainly these kids needed to understand regrouping from the tens column before they could go to the more complex problems given in their math books. Out of complete frustration one day, I got silly. I wrote on the board 4,832 minus 981. The boys looked at me strangely. I picked up the charts of the thousands, took the band off one thousand, showed them the bundles of 100's, then took the band off a hundred and made ten tens. I proceeded to show them how to do the problem, pretending they were able to understand. As I finished what I thought was idle chatter, three of the six looked at me with glints in their eyes. "Miss Fitzgerald," one said, "I bet that's what you meant when we were doing those other problems with the little bundles of counters." I stared at the boys, recognizing that a light had gone on in some of their heads, but also that a light had gone on in mine as well. Why did I assume that ideas and skills necessarily had a logical sequence? Why didn't I realize that bouncing ideas off a far wall might return the ball with greater force than dribbling it with regularity right in front of the kids? Why didn't I know that humor, silliness and playing with ideas relaxes learners and opens them to themselves and to the ideas I want them to learn?

What does my example of third grade boys in a math lesson have to do with teaching the English language arts in any grade in elementary school or high school? Quite a bit I think. Consider the notions about order in language arts learnings that govern our instruction. Here are a few:

-- that we can design appropriate grade levels for specific objectives

-- that beginning readers need to master the names of the letters of the alphabet and their sounds before they can start to learn to read

-- that children must study spelling, grammar, and punctuation before they do much writing

-- that all vocabulary in a new reading story should be presented before the story is read

-- that simpler vocabulary and watered down sentence structure must be given to disabled readers before they can tackle more difficult concepts and more interesting syntax.

We are well programmed to think that there is a God-given, correct order for instruction--and we, the instructors, better not get out of step. The textbooks must be right; their scope and sequence charts appear to be so carefully planned and scientifically ordered. If we do harbor any thoughts of better ways to teach, the prospect of tests that reflect mastery of grade level assigned skills will quickly pull us back into line.

Lock step teaching has important consequences. Although many of our students survive it, and even learn something, too few find joy and satisfaction in their studies in school; too few go on to be avid readers and writers after twelve years of a textbook, workbook and test driven curricula. As one set of authors has said:

> Too often in older children [creative] power has dwindled into timidity in undertaking a new venture, inhibited expression which is uncomfortable without patterns to follow, self-consciousness which leads to such things as exhibitionism or withdrawing. In our desire to educate children to live comfortably within the rigid patterns of our culture, to make them 'well-adjusted,' somehow we rob them of their freedom to create. We emphasize conformity rather than individuality; we direct rather than stimulate; and too eagerly we supply the patterns to be copied (Siks, Dunnington, 124-125).

Under lock step teaching, some students drop out mentally from school even though they are physically present. Others drop out physically and mentally--as the current 27% dropout rate from American high schools shows. I was surprised to learn recently that fifty percent of all high school diplomas granted in New York state last year went to school dropouts who later completed or took an alternative route to graduation through an equivalency program. Elementary teachers aren't excused from this problem; school dropout attitudes start far down in the grades.

But it isn't just the kids who lose out in so-called "scientific" approaches to teaching. For teachers, challenge, excitement and reward are diminished considerably when teaching is overly regulated and systematized. In an article in **Phi Delta Kappan** (January, 1983), Michael Apple describes the consequences of mechanistic instruction on teachers. He says:

> What we have actually seen is the deskilling of our teaching force. Since so much of the curriculum is now conceived outside the schools, teachers often are asked to do little more than to execute someone else's goals and plans and to carry out someone else's suggested activities. A trend that has had a long history in industry--the separation of conception from execution --is now apparent as well in U.S. classrooms.
>
> This trend will have important consequences. When individuals cease to plan and control their own work, the skills essential to these tasks atrophy and are forgotten.... In the process, the very things that make teaching a professional activity--the control of one's expertise and time--are also dissipated.... Hence, the tendency of the curriculum to become totally standardized and systematized, totally focused on competencies measured by tests, and largely dependent on pre-designed commercial materials may have consequences that are exactly the opposite of what we intend. Instead of professional teachers who care about what they do and why they do it, we may have only alienated executors of someone else's plans (Apple, 323).

Many teachers are still mired in behavioral objectives, mastery learning, textbook adoptions, and test scores as a result of the rubble of legislated curriculum thrust upon us. Some teachers may be so "deskilled" that they are beyond hope. But, many of us aren't. We're still up to do battle even though the struggle has been long and hard. I see some new lights at the end of the tunnel, however, beacons that lead me to think we may be turning a corner into a more enlightened teaching era.

One beacon, of course, is the renewed interest in the writing process. In a real sense, the best teaching of writing gives teaching back to teachers. No textbook can teach the complex behaviors involved in writing, although textbook and computer companies will surely try to sell materials that purport to take that worry off our minds. No skill drills will substitute for actual composition. Teachers will need to learn again, if need be, how to think on their feet, to react to students' writing needs as those problems arise--which usually will be outside of any predictable

sequence. I see the growing interest in writing as a beacon for bringing sense back into teaching--and satisfaction.

I know you are aware of the movements in writing instruction, but you probably aren't aware of other beacons heralding changes in teaching and learning--at least I hope they are. Last winter, I saw a reference to a new book whose title caught my eye, **Awakening the Inner Eye: Instruction in Education** (1984) by two professors at Stanford University, Nel Noddings and Paul J. Shore. I was fascinated by the possibilities that book introduced into education. These authors argue convincingly for less systematic, seemingly less logical or linear types of learning that have been ignored or treated contemptuously in modern education, particularly intuition. They define intuition as "that capacity of the mind that reaches objects of knowledge directly" --just as my little math quiz kids did when they leaped over intervening steps to grasp the concept of regrouping by playing with more complex numbers.

It's funny that we don't take intuitive learning seriously (that is, playfully) in school. As the authors of **Awakening the Inner Eye** point out, most of us accept intuition in our daily lives. We are apt to say, "Oh, I get it!" when we make a leap of understanding we can't explain, and we have learned to respect our hunches in many aspects of our lives. Psychic phenomena, dreams and subliminal messages are accepted as important sources of understanding by many of us. We even credit certain types of people with having remarkable intuition: poets, philosophers, geniuses, highly successful businessmen--even children. And think how much credibility is given to "feminine intuition!"

By ignoring the place of intuition in education we are missing a very good thing. These authors note:

> By thus ignoring intuition and regarding it as an unimportant part of learning, educators avoid a process that has been credited with producing some of the most important advances in the sciences and one that has contributed immeasurably to the arts and humanities. Ignoring the potential benefits of intuition also cuts off educators from one of the most exciting and least explored areas of learning in children and adults (2-3).

From ancient times up to the seventeenth century, intuition was studied as a legitimate way of knowing. The Ancient Greeks accepted seers and oracles. The Platonists described the capacity of the mind to connect directly to the realm of ideal forms, and early Christians sought an unexplainable contact with God.

In the seventeenth century, however, Newtonian physics started us on another course. For two hundred years now, rational, precise and predictable knowledge has been valued, emotion has been suspect, and intuition has been treated as something frivolous. The Scientific Revolution and the Age of Technology have had profound effects on the course of education, not always for good.

The authors of **Awakening the Inner Eye**, however, describe a rebirth of insights about intuition in the twentieth century, pointing to early studies on creativity, to Sartre and the Existentialists, to the Gestaltists. In recent times, Buckminster Fuller has said that intuition is the principal tool of humankind in all its endeavors, and in the **Process of Education**, Jerome Bruner stresses the importance of intuition in the classroom. Yet, contemporary educators continue to accept only models of instruction based on behaviorism--on systematic, rational and predictable learning sequences.

It is significant to note, I think, that the authors of **Awakening the Inner Eye** suggest that a loss in creativity recognized in school aged children may be attributable to the way we teach reading to youngsters:

> It may be that the intuitive capacity, fundamentally necessary to experience and so alive and vital in early years, works less often in a dominant role as we acquire more and more concepts and routines. Indeed, the loss of creativity that we so easily blame on schooling may be more properly traced to reading. When we learn to read, we accept a preformed

> representation that is assimilated rapidly to reason. Words themselves too often become the objects of our attention, and the organ of understanding, intuition, is made subservient to the logical demands of decoding. The intuition no longer plays on the objects picked out naturally by Will in a quest for meaning but, rather, it is either made to slumber or reawaken by a Will aroused to the symbol. The effects--curiosity, awe, excitement--that accompany intuitive activity quite naturally disappear when the intuition is placed in a subordinate and automatic role (59).

In spite of improper methodologies used in reading instruction, the authors point out the close ties that intuition has to language arts instruction:

> Literature, by its very nature, draws upon intuitive insight in both its creation and appreciation. As mentioned earlier, appreciation of a poem or novel can be enhanced by acquaintance with the physical (or psychological) setting of the work. Subtle and frequently overlooked aspects of a story, such as the austerity of the Puritan community in which **The Scarlet Letter** takes place, can be examined visually before the novel is read... As with the social studies, an ultimate goal of intuitive presentations in literature is to enable the student to evaluate the soundness or "rightness" of the author's interpretation and cultivate "courageous taste" in approaching and criticizing other literary works (130).

They go on to say:

> In the language arts, development of students' intuitive capacities can serve another function. It can foster creative responses to writing assignments. By learning to feel comfortable with their own intuitive sense of aesthetics, students will be encouraged to produce writing that reflects their individual values and feelings and that does this genuinely with some passion. Whether writing a play, short story, or poem, a student having awareness of the images he or she has stored up from other literary works will be more sensitive in designing a new piece of writing (130).

And these authors delineate the language arts teacher's responsibility for intuitive learning:

> Effective intuitive arrangement and presentation of subject matter depends ultimately on the teacher. No prepackaged curriculum can be completely successful in fostering either the intuitive mode of thought or any intuitive experiences without the continuous, active, committed participation of the teacher.... A uniform, prespecified approach to intuition in the classroom is unlikely to work; instead the effective instructor will endeavor to present material so that those who are prepared to make intuitive interpretations can do so. Above all, a tolerant, encouraging attitude is essential (130-131).

I think we will hear more in the next few years about intuition in learning and teaching. Intuition may serve as a welcome antidote to behavioristic methodologies that have constipated good teaching and good learning for the past three decades or more.

Closely related to **Awakening the Inner Eye** is another new book that takes a related stance. It is by a widely acknowledged teacher educator at the University of Illinois, Louis Rubin, and it is entitled **Artistry in Teaching**. This 1985 publication in many ways reminds me of a classic I read in my early days in teaching. That book was titled **The Art of Teaching** and it was published in 1954. Listen to what Gilbert Highet said about creative teaching thirty years ago:

> This book is called **The Art of Teaching** because I believe that teaching is an art, not a science. It seems to me very dangerous to apply the aims and methods of science to human beings as individuals, although a statistical principle can often be used

to explain their behavior in large groups and a scientific diagnosis of their physical structure is always valuable. But a "scientific" relationship between human beings is bound to be inadequate and perhaps distorted....

...Teaching involves emotions, which cannot be systematically appraised and employed, and human values, which are quite outside the grasp of science. A "scientifically" brought-up child would be a pitiable monster. A "scientific" marriage would be only a thin and crippled version of a true marriage. A "scientific" friendship would be as cold as a chess problem. "Scientific" teaching, even of scientific subjects, will be inadequate as long as both teachers and pupils are human beings. Teaching is not like inducing a chemical reaction: it is much more like painting a picture or making a piece of music, or on a lower level like planting a garden or writing a friendly letter. You must throw your heart into it; you must realize that it cannot all be done by formulas, or you will spoil your work, and your pupils, and yourself (vii-viii).

Isn't it sad that we haven't followed Highet's advice over the past quarter century. How many children and how many teachers might have been spared! Now, however, I think many who didn't listen to Highet, and many who came long after he wrote, are ready to hear Louis Rubin and what he says in **Artistry in Teaching**.

There are two sections of Rubin's book. The first is entitled "Teaching as Art," and in it he describes the creativity, attitudes, and perceptions good teachers rely upon. The second part looks at the classroom as theatre with dramatic episodes, staged lessons and the teacher as an actor.

Rubin has a chapter on "Artistry and Intuition." In it he says:

Intuition is of great significance in teaching because pedagogy, as noted earlier, is an interpersonal craft. The artist's colors, the poet's work, the sculptor's clay and the musician's notes are inanimate. In contrast, children--the teacher's medium--are reactive (60).... The extraordinary awareness displayed by exceptional teachers comes, in large part, from their constant effort to piece together meaning out of fragmentary detail.... Artist teachers who seem so often to do exactly the right thing at exactly the right time have well-tempered instincts. They use insight, acquired through long experience, to get at the heart of a matter and sense what will work. They not only prefer to obey these instincts but are uneasy when, for some reason, they must disregard them. Such teachers find instinctive knowledge exceedingly useful, readily accessible, and an effective shortcut in reaching conclusions (61).... Intuitive thinking, it should be noted, is neither a matter of luck nor special gift. It is a part of ordinary intelligence, crystallized and sharpened by experience. As familiarity in a repetitive endeavor accumulates, our intuitive capacities are refined through practice (65).... A place exists for both linear and intuitive thought in teaching. There is a time for following carefully worked out plans and a time for yielding to sudden insight. Intuition seems most useful when the problem is vague and nebulous; when the problem is obvious, systematic analysis may have more to offer (68-69).

At the end of his book, Rubin echoes Gilbert Highet, and he also echoes Michael Apple who warned about the burnout of "deskilled" teachers. Rubin says:

Artistry may well be the most promising antidote to the frustration, dissatisfaction, and despair which have begun to affect many of the nation's teachers. Additional regulation in the form of mandatory methods can only result in more disillusionment and further blunting of the imagination. It would be far better one would think to encourage higher expectations, greater pride in craft, and teaching behavior which is genuinely self-actuating. Without such encouragement the joys of teaching will become fewer

and fewer and the obligations of the classroom reduced to odious chore. All artists must have a lasting love affair with their arts.... The times have taken a fearsome toll on educators and many teachers and administrators are on the raw edge of despair. Disillusioned and embittered, they no longer care. There was a day, a day that must be returned, when individuals with great gifts thought the teaching of children a worthy lifetime endeavor. It still is! (169-170).

For the sanity of teachers--and for the many kids who can learn regrouping in subtraction, or reading or writing, if teachers have broader perspectives--artistry in teaching must gain priority over the mechanistic methods of instructions that have held us captive for so long. Two new books and the rediscovery of the power of writing probably can't start a revolution, but I think these guideposts in the professional literature right now will help to mobilize the troops and set us on a new course that will make learning more interesting and productive for students--and teaching more professionally satisfying for educators. At this conference, you should find much to help you reawaken the artistry in your own teaching.

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