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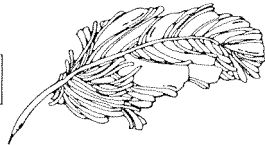
THROUGH TEACHING

A NEWSLETTER HIGHLIGHTING CLASSROOM PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE AMONG KENNESAW'S FACULTY

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THE EDITOR CONSIDERS...



TEACHING AS A HUMAN EXCHANGE

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Teaching and
Learning (CETL)

I am always a little anxious at the beginning of a new quarter. The careful preparation of course syllabi, the rethinking of new presentations of old subject matter, the detailed and copious taking of notes for lectures all contribute to the butterflies I experience as I walk into the classroom on the first day.

Last quarter I was more anxious than usual, not only because I was assigned to teach my first class at Kennesaw but because for the first time in many years I didn't know the students I was expected to teach. As a long time faculty member on a Black campus, the "who I taught" was never a reason for anticipation. I knew those students well. Most often they were kids right out of the city high schools and regardless of our differences, we all shared an important cultural commonality — we were Black. That race should be a consideration at all in 1988 bespeaks the

slowness of the American social order to change. Unfortunately, race does continue to be an important dynamic in American life and in American education. Last quarter in my classroom at Kennesaw I learned an important lesson about race and its impact on teaching.

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Although the interpersonal dynamics during the first day or two of the course were rather stiff and formal, by the end of the second week the class and I had settled into a comfortable rhythm. Intellectually, I found my students to be similar to those I had taught for years, so I was caught offguard by their reaction to one of my assignments.

The assignment called for students to examine a group of pictures, and then to tell in their own words the

main idea that the artist was trying to convey. One of the mainstays of composition teaching is helping students develop cogent main ideas or thesis statements. For this assignment I purposely chose the work of Norman Rockwell since he has great popular appeal. His paintings look like photographs, and I thought my students would better understand the concept of developing a main idea if they used colorful, concrete images to stimulate thought. After saying a word or two about how Rockwell successfully captured the spirit of American life on canvas, I passed out several of his paintings and asked that they write the main ideas that they thought Rockwell was trying to express.

If you are familiar with Rockwell's work, you are aware that his paintings are celebrations of ordinary American life. The paintings I passed around were typical Rockwell — a family gathered around the dinner table at Thanksgiving, the wide-eyed disillusionment of a little boy when he discovers a Santa Claus suit in his father's bureau drawer, a little girl proudly showing off the loss of a tooth to her friend. These were the pictures that gave my

students little difficulty. Their understanding of these Rockwell paintings were clear because they touched memories and value systems with which they were familiar.

But there was one picture that evoked a different reaction. Rockwell's painting of a little black girl of 7 or 8 being escorted to school by National Guardsmen was cause for serious concern. The main ideas they developed were outlandish. The painting shows clearly that the little girl is on her way to school for she carries her school books and school supplies. The marshalls wear badges and arm

bands. In the background, on a wall just behind the figures one faintly sees graffiti which says "KKK" and "NIGGER." A tomato has been splattered against the wall. Rockwell's sympathy is obviously with the little girl who looks straight ahead and walks with dignity. She is a figure who commands our respect. At least so I thought.

To my surprise, the main ideas my students expressed all indicated that the child had committed a crime and was being hauled off to jail by the marshalls. As best I could I tried not to show my sur-

prise at their responses. I then asked what details in the picture brought them to the conclusion that the little girl had done something wrong. They pointed to the tomato that had been thrown against the wall. "She had been defacing property" they said, "and was being taken away by the police to be punished!" Their response created what teachers call a teachable moment. I explained to them that **Look** magazine had commissioned Rockwell to do a painting which depicted the forced integration of many schools during the late 50's and 60's. When I completed the explanation there was an uncomfortable silence in the classroom. As I left class that day I wondered would their analysis of the picture have been the same had the child in it been white. Did they come to such conclusions because they were unknowledgeable about recent American history, or were their responses based on stereotypes that say whenever a Black person comes into contact with the law the Black person is usually at fault. Or, did I simply read too much into their responses?

To test some of my questions, I conducted my own experiment. When I returned home I asked my own children to tell me what they thought the picture was trying to say. My seven year old immediately said that the police were taking care of the little girl. My 14 year old said that the picture had something to do with integration and the guards were protecting the girl. Over and over again I asked people in the Black community, old and young, to tell me what they thought the painting meant. Not once did I get the response which my students gave. Admittedly my experiment was unscientific, but I believe it showed how we each bring our own attitudes and beliefs to bear on a situation, and we see out of eyes colored by our own

REACHING THROUGH TEACHING

Please share with us your ideas about teaching and the exciting strategies you use for making your classrooms successful. Our next **deadline for submissions is April 1, 1988**. Please send all articles to Janis Coombs Epps in THE CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING (CETL).

Giving guidance and vision to CETL, under the direction of Janis Epps, is a Faculty Advisory Council made up of Kennesaw's "Distinguished Teachers" and the 1986-87 study group on "Taking Teaching Seriously." Members of the Faculty Advisory Council to CETL include:

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experiences.

My students bring to the classroom the baggage of white ethnocentrism. As members of the majority in a culture where the majority sets the standard, they represent the norm. Black students and teachers, on the other hand, have lived an existence that requires fluency in two cultures. So the perspective tends to be broader, though the baggage still exists. The baggage I bring is of another sort — memories of water fountains marked white and colored, of signs which said “colored sit to the rear.”

We all carry baggage into our classrooms, for teaching is a human exchange and baggage goes along with being human. What then do we have to give one another? Perhaps, no more than the diversity of our experiences, and a respect and understanding of that diversity. In a composition class, the teacher soon learns through what students write how they think, what they think, and the issues and concerns which are important to them. By the end of the quarter we had found the common ground of our humanity and these young men and women (with all their cultural differences) had become like my own children. In Michael's weird hairstyles and combative stance with authority I saw glimpses of how my own son might face the struggle to reach maturity. In Kim's talkativeness and love of twirling I saw my own daughter grappling with a baton and wanting so desperately to “strut her stuff” on a football field.

It has been only 33 years since *Brown vs. the Board of Education* eradicated separate but equal in the schools. Thirty years is a short time to change how people see each other, but the classroom is a place to begin. I am a pioneer and together the students and I are attempting to blaze new trails of racial understanding. 🍎

THE POWER OF POSITIVE TEACHING

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Associate Professor of Business Law

Runner-up for the 1986-87 Distinguished Teacher Award

Although we all have advanced degrees in our teaching fields, few of us have had any formal training in teaching methods. Thus, we tend to utilize the teaching methods that our teachers used. Unfortunately, not all of our teachers were good, and even worse, we may not know the difference. I began my teaching career at Kennesaw College in 1980, and I attempted to emulate those college professors that I had liked. Although I have found that imitation may be a sincere form of flattery, imitation does not always result in the same outcome as the original. I can model another's methods, but the message may not be the same. Therefore, the question remains: What common teaching method can any teacher use to improve learning? I feel that the answer is positive reinforcement.

My entire teaching outlook changed dramatically after teaching for almost a year. While grading exams one night, I became frustrated that several students were missing an important point of law that I had emphasized in class. My natural response was to put a large minus sign next to an appropriate number of points. I then remarked to my wife that no matter how much you threaten students regarding the importance of certain material, they seem to miss it anyway. Her response changed forever my way of teaching.

“No wonder they don't listen,” she said, “You're using negative

reinforcement. Nobody likes to hear negative comments. Everyone likes to be told that he or she did well. Why don't you start using a system of rewards and recognition to prompt student achievement. Utilize the ability of your students instead of criticizing. Remember, half of your class knew the correct answer.

I suddenly realized why I had disliked so many of my college and law professors. I had always performed well under those teachers that had caused me to feel good about my education. In fact, I had left my law firm because the practice of law was filled with negative reinforcement. Lawyers and judges rarely say a kind word. Suddenly, I became aware that students crave that same feeling: recognition for a job well done.

From that time on, my entire teaching method changed. I involved as many students as possible in class discussions. I instituted a seating chart to be able to address everyone by name. Class discussion became Socratic in nature in order to allow the students the opportunity to understand the material themselves. Where possible, I utilized everyday situations to form the basis of the discussion. I attempted to personalize the questions as much as possible so that the student would want to answer out of self interest. I made a conscious effort to tell students that their answers and explanations were good. No student's answer was wrong, it just needed further discussion.