



Reflections

Thrust into a classroom in 1950 with an emergency certificate, no methods courses, no psychology courses, and no student teaching, I had no idea what to expect or, really, what to do with the sixth graders with whom I was to spend the majority of my day. That first year, though fraught with challenges, made the career decision easy; and sixty years later, I'm still appreciative.

The sixth graders taught me quickly that they were a class, yes, but they were twenty-five very different individuals with different needs and different aptitudes. I found them exciting, friendly, challenging, respectful, fiercely independent, generally without prejudice, and eager to learn—with the right approach. Inadvertently, I created a student-centered classroom. Differentiated instruction and collaborative learning were not then phrases in my vocabulary, but they became key to my beliefs and I hope always to my practice.

Two people confirmed those beliefs and practices and served as mentors long before the concept became widely used and the practice formalized. I don't know that either of them ever articulated or even thought about their actions or their influence.

My mother, who taught sixth graders in a neighboring community, was a godsend with both curriculum and pedagogy. Yes, I had textbooks, but I had few innovative ideas how to involve students in their own learning—and their responsibilities for same. But my mother did, and she shared ideas, books, and methods that were genuinely effective ways to help people learn how to learn. She was never in my classroom, but her passion was contagious.

My other mentor was a high school English teacher. She, too, was never in my classroom, but she was a perfect model for a beginner. She dealt with an often challenging group of juniors and seniors, but she liked and respected her students, and they responded in kind. The object lesson: Respect is not a given. It must be earned, and a large part of earning respect is giving it. I saw that modeled on a daily basis—in and out of the classroom. It's a critical component of teaching and learning, and I see it operat-

ing every time I watch a successful teacher. It is clearly a concept that would be useful in circles beyond education. But I digress.

A basic purpose of education is helping students learn how to learn and in doing so accept increasingly the responsibility for their own education. Yes, we have to determine what students need to know and be able to do at various levels, but they aren't simply empty vessels to be filled with knowledge that we provide. Our purpose is to educate, not indoctrinate.

The challenge of teaching lies in coping with the variables. No two students think exactly alike, learn in precisely the same way or at the same rate, and have absolutely the same interests. Nor do all the students in a classroom arrive there with the same personalities, the same challenges, the same home environments, or the same economic situation. And those variables change from day to day—sometimes during the day. The same is true of teachers. Those are the challenges of teaching. The interplay—indeed, the unpredictability—of all those variables is the joy of teaching.

If, as a society, we truly believe that children are our most important product, then to turn the statement into reality, we must recognize that the current parameters need to change. It will take time, money, and patience as well as a different configuration of the system. If we attack the problem instead of some of the symptoms, we'll have an unbelievably successful system.

In 1950, I didn't think much beyond getting from one day to the next; my primary concern was the kids in front of me. And I hate to admit that I didn't take into consideration where those youngsters should be at the end of the year. What they should know and be able to do didn't go beyond a given day, a week at most.

Several years later, when I became the English teacher for grades 7–12, a different pattern began to manifest itself. As THE English Department, I didn't have to reach consensus with other English teachers. But with six classes of English, each at a different level, plus journalism

and speech, I quickly realized that each year simply could not be a repeat of the last. Put yourself in the youngster's place—the same teacher for the same subject six years in a row. And I was there long enough for that to happen! Pity may come to your mind, but to mine came the very real understanding, however nebulous in statement, of the need for vertical articulation. I didn't accomplish it very well, but I saw the need and have never forgotten it.

When I moved to a suburban system, I never had more than two preps. The problem, however, didn't change, but solving it became more problematic. My hat is off now to the teachers, the programs, the districts who recognize that as students mature and material becomes more complex, improving student skills and increasing their knowledge demands greater emphasis on vertical articulation and increased awareness of the recursive nature of teaching and learning. To recognize that and to practice it will improve graduation rates and lower dropout numbers.

In 1950, I had a job; it didn't occur to me that it was a profession. My sixth graders helped me decide on a career, but it was later that I realized the power of profession. In the early 60s, at the initial meeting of the Colorado Language

Arts Society (CLAS), our newly formed state language arts organization, a teacher from Denver, in a most forceful way, applied John Kennedy's words to us: "Ask not what your profession can do for you; ask instead what you can do for your profession." Her words resonated with me—and still do. The statement, in reality, is double-sided. The more we do for the profession, the more we benefit.

CLAS, NCTE, IRA, and the College Board have all provided inspiration and affirmation. The opportunity to meet and work with so many outstanding educators from all over the country has been both instructive and influential—and tremendously rewarding both personally and professionally. The people with whom I have worked are clear indicators that students are being well served and, in any number of instances, exceptionally well served.

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