Teacher Training for the Humanities

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Who Should Teach the Humanities?

Let us hypothesize an institution which sets up a humanities major for secondary school teachers at the graduate level. Screening for this program should require the following characteristics as prerequisites for entering the program.

1. The first characteristic is a tolerance for ambiguity. The humanities teacher cannot function with an emotional need for closure, for neat packages, for the completion of subjects or ideas, or for dependence on examinations. Two anecdotes will illustrate my point. One concerns a student in the Associate in Arts program, the B. A. at night for older students. During preceding classes we had discussed Greek tragedy, and we were at that point immersed in Crime and Punishment.

One of my students, a young man of about thirty, suddenly burst out in a querulous voice and asked, "What good is this course if you just raise questions and don't give us any answers?"

When I asked him to illustrate specifically, he referred to a question I had raised about whether or not suffering ennobles. When I explained that I was primarily concerned with Dostoyevsky's view, he insisted on knowing my own. Intrigued as well as astonished, I asked him if he thought that I should impose my philosophy about the human condition on other adults.

His answer, short and unambiguous, was "Yes."

"You're our teacher," he said, "and you're supposed to have the answers."

Accustomed to traditional education, this student was unable to accept ambiguity and was consequently unable to accept the teacher in the role of guide rather than as authority figure. This student would not make a good humanities teacher.

Another of my students was working with a high school class on Julius Caesar.

"Was Brutus an honorable man?" she asked.

A student raised his hand and said, "Well—according to his point of view . . ."

My student teacher interrupted sharply.

"I'm not interested in his point of view," she said. "Simply answer 'yes' or no."

This student too would not be comfortable teaching the humanities. Even momentary ambiguity made her nervous.

2. A second essential characteristic is an understanding of the importance of
dialogue or student talk. I am constantly appalled at the medieval attitude toward oral expression which permeates both elementary and secondary levels. When students do talk, it is not because the teacher sees a value in it but as some kind of passing nod to a dimly misunderstood progressivism. Talk is viewed as a reward which teachers let students “do” when they have been quiet for a sufficiently long time.

In a literature project with which I worked last summer at the University of Hawaii’s Curriculum Center, a large variety of teaching methods were employed. Nevertheless, at the end of the project, the students uniformly selected conversation and discussion as the method from which they had learned the most.

A teacher who does not see oral language as the vital core of the humanities would not be comfortable in this subject area. A humanities teacher should be uncomfortable with sterile silence rather than with a lively flow of living language.

3. A third essential characteristic is the ability to see the student as more important than the transmission of the cultural heritage. The humanities teacher must be aware that many things are happening to a student simultaneously, and quite often the least important of these occurrences has to do with the content under discussion.

Ravi Shankar, the sitar player, in a recent speech described a guru who had taught him a great deal about his difficult instrument. This guru, as is apparently traditional in India, regularly beat his students for lack of skill or for failure to practice. Mr. Shankar said proudly that he had never been beaten. This guru was most severe toward his own son. Finally, in anger at his son’s failure to practice, he tied him to a tree for seven days, only permitting the boy’s mother to visit him with his meals.

After recounting this story dispassionately, Mr. Shankar added, “Outside of his work, he was really a very kind man.”

This approach may produce players of the sitar, but a person so passionately involved in his art would not be a good guide for the humanities. To the extent that external conformity of behavior or any one item of content is viewed as of greater importance than the student, to that extent the humanities are not being taught.

4. A fourth characteristic necessary for the humanities teacher is the ability to adapt to a variety of physical arrangements in the classroom.

A person who can tolerate only fixed rows of seats cannot teach the humanities. It is evident that one cannot have a conversation with the back of another person. But I go into classroom after classroom in which seats are in neat rows and teachers complain that they can’t elicit conversation. When I ask why they don’t rearrange the desks, they say that they don’t feel comfortable when the desks are not in neat rows. The absurdity of this was fully illustrated to me last week when I visited a school in which a new wing had just been carpeted and soundproofed and yet the seats were arranged in the same precise rows as before.

A humorous example of this fixed-seat pattern can be seen in the last
scene of the film The President's Analyst. Here, a row of dummy junior executives, plugged in to one central intelligence, sit in perfect rows, looking straight ahead, nodding, smiling, and receiving. When unplugged, these well-dressed dummies collapse. Like our dummy students fastened to fixed seats and desks and plugged in to the teacher's desires, those in the film are expected to repeat but not to think.

Humanities teachers must be comfortable with large groups, with a number of small groups working simultaneously, with individuals working alone, and with the expansion of the classroom to the world outside the school.

5. A fifth necessary characteristic of the teacher is the absence of ressentiment. This word, defined at its simplest as "free-floating ill temper," was first introduced by Nietzsche in The Genealogy of Morals and is the subject of a recent book entitled Society's Children: A Study of Ressentiment in the Secondary School.1

Ressentiment has been further defined as "a lasting mental attitude, caused by systematic repression of certain emotions and affects which leads to the constant tendency to indulge in certain kinds of value delusions and corresponding value judgments. . . . The emotions and affects primarily concerned are revenge, hatred, malice, envy, and the impulse to detract and spite."2 A figure in literature who incorporates these qualities is Dostoyevsky's Underground Man.

Ressentiment is of particular danger to the humanities because the kind of student against whom it is usually directed is the creative student whose thought is divergent from the teacher's. And it is precisely this kind of creative thinking which is needed by the humanities. This type of student does not arrive at right answers by "deducing them from established premises, but by an intuitive understanding of how the problem he is dealing with really works, of what actually goes into it. . . . Facts are not simply right answers, but tools and components for building original solutions."3

When this intelligent, aware, creative student encounters a secure high school teacher who is both intelligent and happy in his work, the best kind of teaching and learning follows. But to the degree that the teacher is ressentient, "his reaction will be permeated with defensive hostility,"4 and he will attempt to stop the student from contributing through ridicule or bullying. This is a particular problem for the humanities because

In the humanities and in the social studies, the creative student is both more threatening and more vulnerable. He is more vulnerable because there aren't any right answers to support him. He is more threatening because these subjects, if truthfully handled, are in themselves threatening to the ressentient. It is the job of the humanities and social sciences to get to the root of human experience, which at best means hewing austere beauty out of some very ugly blocks in such a way that their real character is revealed. This is just what ressentiment cannot tolerate. And this is what makes both the humani-

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2 Max Scheler, Ressentiment (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1961), pp. 45-46.
3 Society's Children, p. 9.
4 Ibid.
ties and social studies so dangerous in the classroom, for to teach them well is to inquire directly into the essence of human experience.\textsuperscript{5}

6. The sixth and last characteristic which I shall deal with here is the ability to understand the symbiosis between teacher and students.

Dorothy Collings, Education Director of UNESCO, made this point in a recent speech. She said that the sickest people she had ever known were those who were one step above the Negro in the South and were directly responsible for keeping Negroes down. "After all," she pointed out, "there are only two ways to keep a man in a ditch. One is to keep your foot in his face. The other is to get down in that ditch yourself and hold him. In either case, where does that put you?"

The humanities teacher must understand that his students can converse only if he enjoys conversation, can be creative only if he is creative, and can continue to grow only if he continues to grow. The classroom climate must be seen as affecting teacher and students equally.

Screening for Admission

I have attempted to describe above six vital characteristics needed by teachers of the humanities. The question may arise here about how we would screen people for characteristics like these which are not really measurable. I would like to suggest that people who are not in accord philosophically will screen themselves out if they understand what is involved in teaching the humanities. This requires careful guidance. One of the reasons that we have so many people in fields that are wrong for them is that they do not gain a correct understanding of the nature of their chosen field until it is too late to change. We must depend on those graduate students who have completed student teaching and may, in addition, have done some regular teaching to make rational decisions about whether to enter the humanities field once they are apprised of all the facts.

For purposes of illustration I would like to suggest a few screening questions which the applicant must ask himself and also discuss with those involved in guidance for this area.

- Does he feel that there is a certain cultural heritage which every student must have? Will a student be deprived of a proper education without this heritage?
- Does he reject the idea of working with a team because he likes to do things his own way in the classroom?
- Does he feel uncomfortable with the seminar approach?
- Does he feel that the humanities makes no provision for the teaching of skills such as grammar and spelling?
- Do noise, student laughter, or student sexuality make him uncomfortable?
- Does he pursue the humanities on his own time through visits to museums and to the performing arts?
- Can he hold up his end of the conversation in open, honest debate with

\textsuperscript{5}Ibid., p. 10.
TEACHER TRAINING FOR THE HUMANITIES

his students in which student respect and forbearance are not based on his role as teacher?

Of course, the above questions are only tentative and were formulated for purposes of illustration. If a student gets past this initial screening, he must then have much opportunity to see the humanities in action in the secondary school. Then, if after this additional exposure he finds that this is not the field for him, he should have the opportunity to transfer back to his major field without loss of credits. This, of course, would involve total university cooperation, which implies that university colleagues must have the same respect for colleagues in different disciplines as high school teachers must have for interdisciplinary teaching.

The Content of the Humanities

The first part of this paper has discussed the kind of person who should and can teach the humanities. This second part will deal with what should be taught and therefore with the content that the humanities teacher should experience before beginning to teach the humanities.

At the present time there appear to be no two humanities courses which are exactly the same. However, the most prevalent patterns can be identified:

1. The Elements Approach. In this approach, literature, art, and music are examined for the factors that make them great.
2. The Chronological Approach. This approach typically includes periods such as “The Age of Greece,” “The Renaissance,” and “The Romantic Era.”
3. The Great Works Approach. In this approach, literature and art are used to supplement “The Great Books.”
4. The Functions Approach (also called The Thematic Approach). In this approach, the works of man are examined for their statements about the universal aspects of the human condition. Clifton Fadiman, describing this in the EBF film The Humanities, says, “The Humanities deal with questions that never go out of style.”

My recommendation for the preparation of humanities teachers combines all of the above approaches. To me, the most important aspect of the content is its ability to illuminate the human condition in a way that would be relevant to the high school student.

This is what I mean by a combination of all approaches: Let us assume that we are studying “Satire” through Gulliver’s Travels, the art of Hogarth and Grosz, the cartoons of Jules Feiffer and Al Capp, the film Doctor Strangelove, and the novel Catch-22.

My initial selection of the theme (the functions approach) would have been based on the recurrence of this way of perceiving the universe in many different times and places.

I would have selected the above works because I regard them as the best artistic manifestations of this theme (the great works approach).

During my exposure to this unit I would find that my understanding and
enjoyment were enhanced through learning something about the world situation
which was being satirized (the chronological approach) and something about
why these works have value for the study (the elements approach).

This combination is valid for the study of all humanities themes which are
selected because they place man in the center. Meaning and relevance come
first in this study. For example, if I see a film such as Cool Hand Luke, I am at
first intrigued by the story and its meaning. Once this major involvement has
been established, I will have the impetus to see it again for further study of its
elements.

Particularly important for humanities teachers, in addition to study of the
four approaches and to the writing of curriculum based on these approaches, is
exposure to and some participation in the performing arts. The ASCD recently
took a vital step forward in the area of exposing teachers to the performing arts.
At their annual conference in Atlantic City, live performances were given for the
teachers attending. These included

- Shakespeare in Opera and Song (The Metropolitan Opera Studio)
- In White America (The Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center)
- Communicating through Creative Dancing (Mrs. Nancy Schuman, North
  Plainfield High School, Plainfield, N. H., and her troop of student dancers
  in a creative interpretation)

Future humanities teachers should have a great deal of exposure of this
kind. Even if it means travel of some distance, this aspect of their training
should be written into the college curriculum.

Summary

I have attempted above to describe the kind of person who should teach the
humanities and the type of content to which he should be exposed. Screening
plus exposure will, it is hoped, result in teachers who have in common a certain
stance. Some of the aspects of this stance are the following. The teacher should
be seen as

- a searcher for truth rather than a transmitter of dogma
- a guide who will expose students to a variety of alternative and conflict-
ing ideas
- a person who is receptive to growth and change
- a creative person who respects the creative process and knows how to
  foster a classroom climate which will encourage creativeness
- a reflective person who is capable of playing with ideas
- a person who respects ideas and people
- a lover of the arts
- a person committed to the value of induction
- a person who would rather uncover ideas than cover facts
- an optimistic person who looks forward to a teaching career which will
  be free from boredom because each year's experience will be related,
different, and yet cumulative
- a person who possesses a vast wealth of interdisciplinary knowledge.