

Where Have All the Teachers Gone?

For years, we students have sat behind wooden desks, notebooks open, pencils set, ready to note those words of wisdom offered us by our teachers. It is they who are the imparters of knowledge. It is they whom we entrust to prepare us for our future role in society. Yet, time and again, we encounter professors who have difficulty communicating facts, relating ideas, and demonstrating essential skills. Numerous reports by university officials on the problems of higher education mention the incompetency of professors. Is pedagogy a vanishing art? We would like to think otherwise, but let us be realistic. Required research and publication, supplementary office work, additional personal responsibilities, tenure and lack of training are the major factors contributing to the poor showing of our teachers in university classrooms.

by Ted Yudelson.

Surely countless exceptions abound; yet, there are many more examples of deficiency in the pedagogical realm. However, before I begin to investigate the various causes of what has been called "the decay of the teaching art"¹, it might be best to first define the objectives of a university and examine their relation to the professorial role. "Universities", claims R.P. Wolff, a member of the philosophy department at Columbia University, "have been founded for all manner of reasons: to preserve an old faith, to proselytize a new one, to train skilled workers, to raise the standards of the professions, to expand the frontiers of knowledge, and even to educate the young".² Professor Wolff's

description is most interesting as it implies that the education of the student body is, at best, only an afterthought. While such an appraisal may be overly sarcastic, the conflict of goals alluded to in Wolff's statement does exist and should not be taken lightly. Could it be that the universities are, in fact, mistaken in the priorities they have set? Has the administration failed to recognize the importance of the learning process and, in so doing, undermined the teaching-learning relationship? It would seem so. In order to illustrate this point, let us consider the following analogy which I do not believe to be farfetched: the university may be likened to a capitalist firm, the faculty to its workers, and the students to the consumers. The students buy the product put out by the firm - education. Assuming that such a comparison is valid, then the question emerges: Is the university to be concerned first and foremost with the satisfaction of its customers, the students, or should it work primarily to manufacture what some regard as a product more sophisticated, glamorous, exciting, and prestigious than education - knowledge? These lines of endeavor should not be mutually exclusive, nor should one be looked upon as the poor relation of the other. However, it appears that the ability to conduct basic research is of major importance to the powers that be. There is, consequently, not enough effort being invested in the domain of customer service. I firmly believe that the aim of every company should be to keep the customer satisfied. And, as notes Jacques Barzun, Dean of Faculties and Provost at Columbia University for twelve years, it is the duty of the university to "first of all...ensure the continuity of teaching: a nonteaching university is a contradiction in terms. Still, contradiction has never stopped corporate bodies from forgetting their purpose"³. Many and insidious are the ways in which this amnesia becomes institutionalized.

We have certainly all heard of universities that seek recognition by luring highly respected and/or well known

personalities to their staffs. Such people may be found among "ex-ambassadors, deposed heads of foreign states, international bankers with government experience, or artists of reknown"⁴. Faculties that include members of these and other elite groups ostensibly enhance the image of the institution. That is all well and good in these times of disappearing alumni donations and declining student enrollment, but we should examine how this practice affects the teaching-learning relationship. When the expertise that these specialists acquire from their years of practical experience is brought into the classroom, it is of indisputable value to the learning process. Hmmm. Sounds terrific so far. But wait. There is a small catch which the administration seems to have overlooked - the transmission of all this wonderful knowledge and experience to the students. Contrary to the general opinion of university officials, there is no guarantee that an authority in any area will be a competent teacher. Michael Coote, Director of the School of Architecture at Carleton University, remarked that "teaching (is) a professional occupation in its own right, which (these experts) engage in with no training at all and with no experience other than having been taught (themselves) (by people who had no training at all, etc. ... self-perpetuating incompetence?)"⁵. Indeed, such professorships pose a peculiar problem. In essence, "a great university, while it may sincerely want good teachers, will compromise and take the great inaudible expert whom, it would be cruelty to both sides, to put in front of a class"⁶. There is a remote chance, of course, that the expert may be a perfectly competent teacher. But, all facts considered, the chance is certainly remote.

The 'teaching expert versus expert teacher' dilemma is compounded by the hiring practices of the professional schools, which have no qualms about subjecting students to the vagaries of their academic staffs. In a variety of ways, the activities of their professors

"reach out beyond the university, and inevitably loyalties are divided. The professional faculties cannot commit themselves or their energies to the university unconditionally, as professors in the arts and sciences regularly do".⁷ As a result, good teaching practice is too often sacrificed in favor of the state-of-the-art knowledge available from working professionals who may be poorly equipped to interpret their experiences for us because they do not grasp the fundamentals of teaching.

All hope is not lost, however. While "many people believe that great lecturers, if not poor ones, are born, it is, in fact, not unrealistic to expect someone to change from a mediocre lecturer to a good one".⁸ This transformation can be accomplished via teaching clinics which all professors, ideally, should attend. McGill University, for instance, has a Centre for Teaching and Learning Services that offers a marvelous modular course on teaching and classroom instruction as well as information sessions on the use of visual aids.⁹ Moreover, it possesses a very specialized collection of books and articles on teaching and other related subjects. It is unfortunate that these impressive facilities are hardly being used to their full advantage. If all else fails, consultation with professors who have established reputations as first-rate teachers may also be beneficial in refining teaching skills.

Deficiency in such skills is not always the problem, however. The quality of education may also be adversely affected by the attitude of the staff. For example, there are those scholars who are granted permission to use university facilities for research purposes in exchange for their teaching services. Many such professors evidently have little desire to teach and merely go through the motions in order to fulfill their contractual obligations to the university. A similar outlook is encountered among professors who are forced to teach a course in which they do not have a vested interest. Undoubtedly, a lack of enthusiasm in the subject of instruction

itself is hardly conducive to good teaching.

Yet another problem which besets university teachers is the policy of 'Publish or Perish'. The university sets up a dipolar field in which professors navigate between the opposing demands of research and teaching. There are many who are of the opinion that research is "merely time and energy stolen from the students".¹⁰ On the other hand, the importance of research as a means of maintaining "an individual at the forefront of his field and, therefore, "making him a more interesting and vital teacher" cannot be denied. This conflict poses some difficulty for the educational system.

Whether research undertaken concomitantly with teaching enriches or limits the teaching-learning relationship, I cannot say for certain. It is my hope that a conscious effort is being made to achieve the former. In any case, it could be argued that there is little, if any, correlation between being a good teacher and being a good researcher.

Finally, there is the touchy subject of tenure. It appears that seniority, rather than competence, is the sole criterion for the procurement of a lifetime position. The university seems not to be concerned by the fact that a tenured professor with poor teaching skills constitutes a weak link in the learning process. Job security is fine, but I, like many students, believe the tenure system inadvertently creates an unassailable refuge in which academic mediocrity may hide, safe from peer review and external pressure. Several instances have been reported to me wherein a faculty member or university official has admitted the inability of a professor to teach, only to concede that "he has tenure; we're stuck with him",¹² a revelation that boggles the mind with its absurdity. It might be momentarily consoling to note that "we (students) cannot know all that goes into the choice of a man for a tenure post - his teaching if good is an asset; but there is his depth of mind to consider, his research,

his age, his specialty, his compatibility - all these taken in comparison with older men on the staff and younger men elsewhere, and in conjunction with budget allocations and the strategy of retirements and replacements. To make all this clear to a student committee would require a two-term seminar, and when it was over the impression left might be that older men lack the pure heart and candid mind"¹³

In conclusion, I can only reiterate the words of Jacques Barzun who, so eloquently and concisely described the frustration that permeates university campuses:

"...the student feels that he suffers from neglect. He is conscious of a greater maturity than his teachers credit him with or they would not subject him to cavalier treatment as they so often do - unpunctual, slipshod in marking papers, ill-prepared in lecture, careless about assignments - results, all of them, of academic rout previously described. To put it another way, the student sees and resents the fact that teaching is no longer the central concern of the university or of its members"¹⁴

If we students agree with Barzun's bleak assessment and feel the attitudes and practices cited by him are hopelessly entrenched within the system, then we can only look forward to the day when most of our higher education will emanate from the programmable innards of sophisticated teaching machines. Perhaps a collection of silicon chips could teach us more efficiently; but if we settle for this, we have tacitly admitted defeat. No computer console will ever be able to supplant the human element: spontaneity, immediacy, humour and warmth are qualities that only a dedicated teacher can provide. And there is no lack of dedication to teaching among the majority of men and women who lecture us daily. To a large degree, the crisis in education has developed

because their integrity has been compromised by a system that has grossly devalued the teaching aspect of their jobs. It is time to confront the realities of this age-old problem. Students along with the staff, administration, government officials and even the public must work together to reorder the faulty priorities of our academic institutions so that they may honestly reflect their function as educating bodies. Such initiative would be instrumental in restoring respect and prominence to the pedagogical aspect of professorships. In the final analysis, however, it is we, students, who, via our conscientious attendance of classes and punctual completion of assigned work, will have to demonstrate that all efforts professors make on our behalf will be worthwhile. □

References

1. Jacques Barzun, "The American University", 1968, p.67
2. Robert Paul Wolff, "The Ideal of the University", 1969, p.1
3. Barzun, p.43
4. Barzun, p.43
5. Michael Coote, "On Professional Development", The Fifth Column, Vol.1 No.2, 1981, p.11
6. Barzun, p.42
7. Wolff, p.13
8. Cecily Lawson-Smith, "The Lecture - A Vital Component of University Life", 1978, p.1
9. The ten booklets, which comprise the modular course on teaching and classroom instruction, were written (produced) at McGill and are well known internationally. They offer a myriad of helpful suggestions that may be easily applied. In particular, I recommend a review of Module 4 which notes characteristics of good teaching. It is regrettable that such simple, yet critically important principles are frequently overlooked.
10. Irving Howe, "Beleaguered Professors", The Troubled Campus, 1966, p.58
11. Lawson-Smith, p.16
12. Barzun, p.42
13. Barzun, pp.85-86
14. Barzun, p.69