Lecture 9: Beyond Basic Mastery to Something More

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Ninth Annual
LAST LECTURE
By
KENNETH C. FARRER
I am grateful to be invited to deliver this address tonight and I thank those of you who have been in my seminars and classrooms for this honor. This year brings to a semi-conclusion forty-two years of service in public school education. I would have chosen no better life. I have had the opportunity to work with children and youth and with mature women and men in the collegial ranks of teaching, supervising, and administering. My best models of humanity have come from the profession of educators. I have initiated present superintendents, church authorities, attorneys, justices of the courts, surgeons, and numerous master teachers to their first years of teaching in our public schools, and they in return have excelled their leader. Leland Jacobs, one of my most favorite teachers, said to me that to be surpassed by one's children or students was the mark of a successful parent or teacher. Whatever the public may have to say about the present climate of the classrooms of our nation, I have never looked in vain for excellent students and teachers. Fortunately, I think for all of us living in this culture of democracy, we are blessed with the abundant presence of human beings of exceptional quality.

In May, 1959, C.P. Snow delivered the Rede Lecture at Cambridge University in which he addressed a critical issue in the British Empire. In September 1963, at public request, he was invited to return to share his modified thoughts, so critically had he provoked his countrymen. In his delivery of The Two Cultures, he presented both the diversifying and the unifying potential of the existence of a culture of the arts juxtaposed with a culture of the sciences, and their influence
to separate or to unify one's fellow men. In a less learned way, but before an equally distinguished community of experts, I have a similar opportunity tonight to share with you my reality and a critique of education in our time.

For the second time in my professional career, it has become a major task for all educators, parents, and leaders of the young to aid in the restoration of public confidence in American schools. To restore public confidence, our political officials are insisting that quality education become a legal right. New Jersey has established legislation calling for thorough and efficient education, equating thorough and efficient with quality and making it a basic right by law. The intensity of this movement for quality and a return of excellence in education, as announced in our nation's capitol last year, indicates the first major, comprehensive look at what is taught in American schools since the Soviets launched Sputnik in 1957. Congress responded with the National Defense Education Act for the purpose of assuring American academic supremacy. Some of those N.D.E.A. curricular reforms produced in the early 60's were incorporated into present-day teaching, and some have been repudiated. Most of the reforms have simply faded away. The back-to-basics movement, the strongest contemporary voice in curriculum management, again threatens to strip the awesome structure of knowledge to basic facts and primary skills. The prestigious National Science Foundation is again urging similar studies, as in the early 60's, limiting its perspective to three disciplines of knowledge. Math and science remain among the three disciplines, but computer science has replaced the social sciences in its national priority. Both the basics
movement and the Science Foundation have forced each discipline (again for the second time) into a defensive stance; fighting for its own integrity; if not its very survival.

From whence do virtues arise? How does one acquire these beneficial qualities of strength or courage which comprise human excellence? What makes for quality education? Such a quest requires, among other things, that the community perceive the virtues to be something that the community needs and should have; that there are traditional means available for encouraging virtues and discouraging vice; and, that it is legitimate for the community to use the available means to encourage or discourage conduct in accordance to what it needs and is entitled to.

The American school system has maintained that its central purpose is the development of rational processes of problem solving. It has been built upon a commitment to non-contestable ethical principles: truth-telling, promise-keeping, respect for the uniqueness of the person, respect for private property, and a concern for the human condition; namely, care of the young, the orphans, the aged, the handicapped. It has honored virtues leading to justice, equal access to opportunities, liberty, making manifest that these virtues lead toward a particular moral excellence. (R.S. Peters)

Throughout the school's history, those responsible for educational programs have returned to a thorough-going inquiry into the nature of the person, into what contributes to the development of that nature and, consequently, to human happiness. The results of their inquiries have usually been that unless we had an awareness of the very best we could
not be practical enough in everyday affairs to see what was really wrong with our society and its schools to devise the sensible and effective compromises we'll need to make from time to time.

Public schools today are in the grasp of new dynamic forces with a power geared to accelerated industrialization and value-neutral automation. As a result, substantial modifications in school programs are commonplace. Schools, long viewed as conveyors of culture heritage and traditional values, are being molded to assume new functions prescribed by our growing technological, bureaucratic, and automated society.

Specific influences acting upon the need for change in education come from large foundations, merging corporate bodies with their messages being conveyed by mass media. In Landscapes of Learning, Maxine Greene\(^2\) cites the conflicts between these messages and former virtues. "There exists a demand for greater freedom while demanding an increase in authority; there exists a demand for liberty while demanding greater law and order; there exists a demand to be allowed to express one's views while demanding a higher degree of conformity." Mixed signals such as these are abundant in the language we speak.

In our present-centered information environments, and in our technological society, it is not easy to locate a rationale for education. We are not putting forward a clear vision of what schools are for or what constitutes an educated person, except perhaps as advocates of this technological society would have it: to equip young people to cope with competition, to become economically self-reliant, a person with limited commitment and an imprecise view, but with plenty of
marketable skills. If there is, at present, any underlying theme to American education it is precisely that: Education is to provide jobs. Its main purpose is to prepare for entrance into the economy. All subjects tend to be judged by students and their parents in terms of immediate practicality; or, to put it more bluntly, in terms of what it is worth economically. They ask, "What is its utility?" "How can we use it?" Its worth is in terms of its immediate usefulness. Its image is the application to some material product.

By far the most prevalent view of schools is the technological. Its first held assumption is that education is technical and teachers are technicians. Improvement is possible by training teachers in new and improved techniques. This view is best illustrated by thousands of districts that "adopt programs" and assume they will be implemented immediately. The process of involving the school is linear; that is, it is assumed that people just need exposure and minimal training to implement these new and better ideas. The technological view (program development) focuses on the innovation itself and pays scant attention to the process of change, the underlying principles and values, the politics, or the people. Pedagogy has developed into a science of teaching in such a way as to be wholly emancipated from the substantive nature of the material to be taught. Methods take precedence over the nature of the subject matter. This assumption is predicated upon the notion that you can know and understand only what you have done yourself. It's application to education appears obvious: to substitute insofar as possible doing for reflective learning. The conscious
intention is not to teach knowledge as data for rational thinking but to inculcate a skill.

Of course skill mastery is necessary, but the demand for such mastery has to be reconciled with the requirements of personal growth and with the capability to project into the future with the requirements of critical thought. The ability to act in such a fashion depends on the sense of personal agency which we associate with autonomy. Autonomous people manage to be attentive to the ways of expressing an intentional action of some kind. They are likely to be guided by the principles they have freely chosen to live—principles such as fairness, respect for others, concern for human integrity—persons who do not have to decide on each occasion how they ought to behave. This is because they have chosen (not conditioned nor indoctrinated but chosen) at some time and some level, to keep their promises, to listen to other's viewpoints, to respond to requests for help, to do their work as decently as they can. (Elliot Eisner)

There are, of course, many people who refuse confrontation, who concede to be typically part of a group or a crowd. Comfortable, complacent, bland, they live automatically and indifferently. They follow; they conform; they think in terms of stereotypes and myths; they choose neither to learn nor to become. They tend to become or to be as Joseph Conrad once put it "hollow men - persons who neither suffer nor rejoice." Others like Dostoevsky's narrator rants against determinisms and bland conformities: "What man wants is simply independent choice, whatever that independence may cost or wherever it may lead."
What we have before us in terms of the "real content of schooling" is this intellectual-moral content. It is really a problem of rational thinking within a society that recognizes the uniqueness and dignity of the individual.

In his 1949 Inglis Lecture, Harold Benjamin, author of *The Saber-Tooth Curriculum*, emphasized the political consequences of unity and diversity within a culture such as ours by asking the question which democratic society may ignore only at its peril. The question is double-barrelled:

1. How much uniformity does this society need for safety?
2. How much differentiation does this society require for progress?

*Mastery of the basics* is a start to mastering one's self in the world. The tools of present-day living would likely include the past generations definition of the 3 r's (reading, writing, rhetoric) or the modern interpretation ("reading about" and "calculating with") and, in addition, those primary social skills which sustain us in adapting to the multiple environments. We have revived the concept of mastering as a goal in education. Both inside and outside the school, tough-minded persons in increasing numbers are demanding that, where the road of mastery can be laid down, we must succeed in teaching what is to be learned.

As a result, we talk less these days about continuous progress and more about failure-free and prescriptive teaching. We are being provoked to agree that we can teach everybody what everybody has to know. The use of commercialized materials and prescribed methods are
the answers. We will know a great deal more about what this is going to mean to us as the education industry begins to get itself into full production. Many members of the public, like many young people, do not know what to make of their being in the world. Because their unknowing afflicts them as if it were objectively meaningless, they deny the need for thinking and look for technique in its stead.

How surprised we are when we view the present situation of public education with attention on prescribed, minimum competencies to find that we really have triumphed over the problem of how to teach everybody whatever everybody needs to know. By reviving mastery as our goal, by letting go of the notion of limitation in capacity to learn, by analyzing more technologically what needs to be and can be learned, by preparing dramatically different materials available by computerized assistance—yes, by redefining all these elements, we have achieved well the means to basic mastering of functions at lower levels of development. This achievement gives the temporary assurance that we can provide safety, physical comfort, food, and manpower for our technological society. We can truthfully say that now with the prospect of success in teaching basic facts and skills, we will have the time to think about the question of which virtues comprise human excellence and how they are to be made available to youth in their transition toward constructive adult life.

It is at this healthful level of functioning in these lesser (yet basic) learnings that the person pursues information because he has to, because he feels he must, because he needs to know those minimums so vital and hardly to be denied.
Still, we tend to return to our discomfort in the face of such triumph and wonder at what we have paid or seem willing to pay for the prospect of such success. Some of us know, when we think of the realms in which success is to be expected, that in order to succeed we have altered our conception of what education is all about: limited it to what can be measured, reduced it to what has been normed, fundamentalized it to a memorized curriculum built on right answers and on a true-false dichotomy.

Thus, a growing number of us are at this moment uneasy. In fact, some of us may be more than uneasy; we are horrified at what success would seem to mean. To some zealots of the new era, it would seem right and proper that the realm of what everybody needs to know could be extended to everything that anybody might ever want to learn. "If we can," they seem to be saying, "through the use of this process of instruction, succeed with a piece of the program, why not move ahead to all of it! Let us analyze, atomize, technologize, prescribe, and so truly routinize the whole curriculum!"

But while we are surprised that anybody would conceive of the total curriculum as lending itself to such treatment, and may be disappointed perhaps at the waste of time going into wholesale attempts to misapply the process of individualized instruction, many of us are puzzled by and apprehensive about something much more likely to be hard to accept. We believe we can trust to the general good sense of human beings to take care of excesses of zeal in the routinization of teaching modes of instruction. But are we ourselves ready to assume responsibility for
redesigning our program to provide more adequately for the greater aspects of learning?

We have had to spend so much time on the basic-mastery segment of school curriculum during the past decade that we have not done what we would have liked with the rest of the curriculum. Now the prospect of success in teaching the facts and skills means that we will have the time and space to do more with what has been subordinated or deleted.

What is involved in this task? The first thing is to clarify the differences between the lesser and the greater learnings in terms of levels of mental processes and socialization in the schools.

Now, such a contrast of definition hopefully will serve to make plain that I have been speaking of a somewhat uniform product of instruction. However, here I must speak of the person and his power and of his growth. At this point it might be useful if I were to propose two definitions for the individualization of instruction: (a) the individualization that leads to the achievement of mastery in the lesser learnings and (b) the individualization that leads to the development of growth and power in the larger learnings. The achievement of mastery in the lesser learnings aims at success despite individual differences; the development of growth and power in the greater learnings aims at success in terms of individual differences, perhaps actually seeking to extend these differences toward a greater range of human variability, at least in all the general desired directions or areas of growth.

What I am moving into now is that aspect of quality education of the greater learnings (the education of the poet) as compared with the
education of mastery in basic facts and skills (the education of the
whistler).

What we need to do is to teach the youth what has been said, what
has been done, what has been wrong, what has been right about what has
been said, done, and thought; and as soon as we have engaged them, we
work to influence their awareness that this is only the beginning. On
the basis of what has been said, find for oneself what is possible, what
is consistent, what is logical, what coordinates and relates to what,
what data are inaccurate, biased, limited. Judge it, criticize it,
interpret it, and think about the results of their thinking. We
complete this at every stage—even in the kindergarten. At each stage
we are completing an aspect of personalized meaning through the use of
higher level thinking processes which constitute the first set of goals
common to a definition of quality or excellence in education.

An English professor, Elisabeth McPherson,³ has expanded her
opinion of what ought to constitute the center of the life of learning.
She is making a clear demand for thoughtfulness, critical awareness, and
a mastery of fundamental skills. "I think it's basic to be able to read
with discrimination, to recognize unsupported generalization and demand
to see the specific evidence they're based on ... I think it's basic
for people to know slant when they see it, and to be aware of 'double-
speak'. I think it's basic for people to recognize distortion in what
they read and avoid it in what they write ... Above all, I think it's
basic to remember that both reading and writing, at their best, are
ways of sharing meaningful experiences with other people."
George Orwell realized that the manipulation of speech could be every bit as deadly as the bearing of arms. Orwell's greatest accomplishment was to remind people that they could think... that they could consider... that they could create their own meanings of their experiences. He steadfastly valued ideas over ideology. He had an abiding, almost pious, faith in the ability of humankind to correct its deficiencies by the most radical process of all... thinking.

To Hannah Arendt, thinking was a very different matter from knowing. In her thinking section of Life of the Mind, "Knowing has an object and a purpose while thinking is self-referential; knowing's result, truth, is a very different thing from thinking's result, meaning or meaningful. Thinking is that function in which you bring out all your opinions, prejudices, what have you... and you remain empty after thinking... and once you are empty, then, in a way which is difficult to say, you are prepared to judge. That is, we are now prepared to meet the phenomena, so to speak, head-on, without any preconceived system." Throughout her Life of the Mind she had to deal with the oddness of describing in language what cannot be seen—the mental activities of thinking, willing, and judging.

There is no question in my mind that the humanities supply great sources of data for interpretive, reflective thinking and is instrumental in provoking thought at its highest levels of mental processing. Every time a child in his schooling experience connects with a selected piece of poetry, it changes the person in some unmeasurable way. We have to find current examples of the thoughts revealed in the best literature. Unless we can do this, the youngster
will bow to an authority which he thinks will give to him the most constructive life—which may not lead him to independence and which may not lead him to improving his intellectual and moral literacy.

"That kind of literature has a definite kind of influence in the private negotiation for meaning the student creates of self. Many varieties of literature do something for children and youth in conversations with themselves. Most of our youth is spent in private conversations with self, although we tend to overlook the impact of this internalization process as we place in highest priority the conversations with others." (Maxine Greene)⁶

It is what is taught in a reflective way that will determine the ability of each individual not only to cope in the complex world but also to make a positive contribution; and it is what we teach in this manner to all students in common that will mold a restored national purpose and assure a renewed national cohesion.

What would you promote as the center of the life of learning?

Students at U.S.U. have often suggested to me what freedom to learn ought to signify—the release of human capacity. When teachers help others to create a space in which personal meanings can emerge, then persons will take the risk to begin choosing the moral life. The moral life is not necessarily the self-denying life, doing what others expect of one, or doing what others insist one ought to do. It can best be characterized as a life of considering and caring, a life of the kind of wide-awakeness associated with full attention to life and its requirements.⁷
It is in this realm of moral valuing that we select a second set of goals common to a definition of quality education. The basic premise for this set of goals is that the values of modern American communities are changing and that most school curricula teach little about the moral life or the moral environment. This comes about deliberately because multiple valuing is popular now, particularly the notion that everyone's values are as good as everyone else's values.

Many writers (Edgar Friedenberg, as one example) have written about the contemporary pre-occupation with self-improvement. Not only is there a new involvement with physical improvement; there continues to be a widespread investment in sensitivity-training and encounter experiences. There is nothing inherently harmful about any of these. Most of such undertakings have to do with one's desire to satisfy immediate needs. Absorbed in self-perfecting, however, people begin not to care or not to prefer to be fully involved outside the private sphere. The problem arises when they choose their private passions as alternatives to social membership; to their abstaining from participation in political and social activities of their society. The citizens' roles are various and mutually interdependent. A humane society values individual freedom within that framework of cooperative living. That each person should control his own fate at the expense of all others is a price too high for any community. Persons may be choosing a kind of freedom from responsibility for others, and in so doing choose against the moral life.

But it seems reasonable to assume that most people value truth-telling; that promise-keeping is better than lying; that settling
arguments or resolving conflict by discussion is superior to violence; and that stealing, cheating, and killing are just plain wrong. In order to do this, the schools have the job of acknowledging the law of the land as the basic code of ethics for this country. The content that belongs in the classroom to be reflected upon and brought to a level of personal meaning and conviction concerns the vast body of laws—federal, state, and local—that define by national consensus what people may and may not do by law in a large part of their daily lives. Not only should the schools use these data for thinking purposes, but they should also establish a social order based on law within the schools so that students will live in school according to a code of ethics which the students themselves have refined and have elected to be held accountable. It is in the area of civic literacy that our nation's schools have not done well. In the last testing on the International Evaluation of Educational Achievement reported by Ralph Tyler and Science Research Associates, the average test score of 17-year-old American youth in civic education placed them in the lowest third of the advanced nations involved in the comparison. A majority of American youth did not appear to understand our political system or seem to comprehend how it works; only a bare majority expressed a belief in the principles safeguarding our Bill of Rights; and a minimum reported interest in participating in civic activities.

Henry Perkinson writes about the kind of quality and virtue which would constitute an educated person for life in a culture of democracy. He opts for a kid of schooling that will prepare all persons to be
concerned critics so that they can hold themselves and their leaders accountable.

The third set of goals important to a definition of quality or excellence in education includes the identification and cultivation of talent. As a person explores his potential for expression, he begins to explore patterns of psychological gratification, discovering the satisfaction that comes with participation in the arts and human service fields. Talents have a natural connection between the organism and ways of achieving satisfaction—talents which form the basis for a person's living, or talents which lead to careers or converted to jobs. This development is best afforded youth in a rich array of liberal education electives throughout the grades and wide access to participation in extra class activities.

The concept of talent has important psychological components that make it central to the development of three human attributes; namely, resurgence, confidence, perseverance. Each of these attributes is rooted basically in the nature of the individual. Resurgence is an internal motivation which helps the student to gain a sense of dedication to personal outcomes. One could not view the 1984 Olympics without witnessing manifestations of this human attribute. Confidence results from an internalized faith in one's self. Witness the artistry of a dramatic portrayal or musical rendering in which the performer expresses an interpretation different from all other interpretations of the same script or composition. In gaining confidence, the performer faces new situations and challenges with the anticipation of success, thus making it possible for him to accept criticism or praise.
Perseverance implies forward movement and steadfastness of the person. One seldom attends a school dance review, an art exhibit, a science fair, an industrial craftsmanship display, a poetry recital, or a home-making demonstration without sensing the perseverance of higher levels of perfection. The student becomes committed to progress through a project and undertakes the stages of progression with spirit and determination in spite of hard work and often discouraging set-backs.

These three components constitute potential outcomes of schooling. They are aesthetic or expressive outcomes which make the learning significant and unforgettable. Aesthetic education leading to the development of talent is not concerned with what learners memorize nor even with how much they "remember". Aesthetic education is concerned with making learning "memorable" through the development of the three human attributes mentioned: resurgence, confidence, and perseverance.

Studies which encourage the integration of arts and sciences suggest the fourth set from which the goals in quality education are to be drawn. One needs to persevere in the search of intellectual, social, and moral themes. One possibility is to propose a theme which animated Jacob Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man*. The theme is that humanity's destiny is to be found in the search for new meanings. Other authors have suggested that the themes are to be found in the synoptics. Although Bronowski's emphasis was on science, his work is a masterpiece of integrating the arts and humanities in an unending quest to gain an understanding of man, nature, and one's place in it. It's the story of man's creativeness in reflecting and in facing loneliness, ignorance, and disorder. Core-curricula in contrast with single-subject emphasis
appears to have produced the best public school results toward the integration of thought.

At present, our attitude toward teaching and learning is too absolute, too linear, too problematic, too aggressive. What we need to bring back for balance is the insertion of the situational, the intuitive, the sensitivity, and the subtlety. The qualitative dimension of living and thinking as well as the quantitative assessment of the outcome of productivity need to be kept in balance for quality and excellence of life in the classroom to surface. Children and youth might then learn to respond to the radiance of the larger learnings to which I have referred as "something more" or to those other basics: the wholeness and unity of experience - the art of living in harmonious balance with nature and with each other.  

I should like in conclusion to share with you a work of poetry which has provided my students and me opportunities to draw upon multiple sources of rationality and inspiration in creating our own meanings.
IN BROKEN IMAGES

by Robert Graves

He is quick, thinking in clear images;
I am slow, thinking in broken images.

He becomes dull, trusting to his clear images;
I become sharp mistrusting my broken images.

Trusting his images, he assumes their relevance;
Mistrusting my images, I question their relevance.

Assuming their relevance, he assumes the fact;
Questioning their relevance, I question the fact.

When the fact fails him, he questions his senses;
When the fact fails me, I approve my senses.

He continues quick and dull in his clear images;
I continue slow and sharp in my broken images.

He in a new confusion of his understanding;
I in a new understanding of my confusion.
References


7. from Associated Students Comprehensive Examinations, 1983.


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