



4-1-1976

Humanistically-Oriented Science

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Recommended Citation

Bluemle, Mary (1976) "Humanistically-Oriented Science," *Journal of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-journal/vol2/iss1/5>

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On Having Faith in Teachers

by
George M. A. Stanic

*"The best way to
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In my role as a supervisor of preservice teachers, I constantly live with the tension of contradictory feelings. The faith in teachers that I profess in the courses I teach, at conferences, and in other interactions with teachers and university colleagues exists along with the despair I feel as I observe some teachers and student teachers in schools. I truly believe that the best way to make teaching a more rewarding and rewarded profession is to give teachers control of their work--not just in terms of letting teachers decide how to teach what they are told to teach but also in terms of letting them decide what should be taught to the students in their classrooms. I am not against a variety of people at local, state and national levels having input into important decisions about schools, but I do not think we can call teaching a profession until teachers are given the opportunity, or take the responsibility, to decide what should take place in their classrooms. Yet, when I watch children in some classrooms deal with trivial, monotonous, unsupervised and unevaluated "seat-work"; when I see punishments that range from copying sentences to paddling; when I sit in classrooms where students are emotionally and intellectually abused--that is when my faith in teachers and my belief that they should have more control of their work are challenged.

In the end, I maintain my faith. There are incompetent teachers. And many teachers could do more right now, even without changing the present conditions of teaching, to make the lives of their students more worthwhile. But I believe most of the unfortunate examples of teaching I see are not the result of allowing incompetent teachers to teach, but of not allowing competent teachers to teach. The oppressive conditions under which teachers work make most of the inappropriate teaching practices I see understandable, if not inevitable. And the fact is that I see many wonderful teachers

resisting oppressive conditions, or at least expressing dismay about what they are forced to do in their classrooms.

In a sense, I am writing this essay not just to express my faith, but also to convince myself that I still have it. And I am also writing to express my appreciation to Kate, the kind of student teacher who helps me continue to believe that my faith in teachers is justified.

Being a reflective teacher requires both reflective thought and reasoned action. Working under the difficult conditions of student teaching in someone else's classroom, Kate demonstrated technical teaching skills that were adequate but not exceptional; however, she was exceptional in her ability to reflect on her work. And she demonstrated a commitment to act on her beliefs. For example, she decided at one point during her 10-week student teaching experience in a third-grade classroom to implement a competitive reward system designed to encourage children to learn their multiplication facts. After implementing the system, she made the following comment in her journal:

Today, after the second period class had a math fact sheet (multiplication facts), Mike got very upset. He has been studying a lot for his tests, but he still isn't doing so well. Today, he missed 10 problems and he got so upset he just cried. I talked to him after class and gave him a small set of multiplication cards. I see now that competition among students is very bad and defeating for some students. For many students the reward system has served as a great motivator, but for some like Mike it has really hurt. I'm trying to keep his interest in the multiplication fact sheets by giving him some individual assistance and guidance.

The point here is not that Kate had come up with a modification to make the reward system more appropriate; in fact, I believe the system had other unintended, unfortunate consequences (consequences that Kate and I had discussed). The point is that Kate was willing to look at her idea not just from a technical viewpoint, but also in terms of the effects it had on individual children. Furthermore, she was willing to change and did change her actions based on her evaluation of the system, even though she believed that, on the whole, it was a success.

Her ability to view actions from the point of view of the children involved is also evident in the following excerpt from her journal, in which she discusses "a teacher's reaction to a student's happiness":

Wanda, a little girl in my science class, brought a baby bird into my home-room this morning. Well, Mrs. C and I both explained calmly to Wanda why it was wrong to take the little bird from its mother. Well, not only Wanda had brought in a baby bird, but her cousin Richard had a baby bird too. Well, the birds really got to chirping and Mrs. M. asked who brought the birds in. I told her. Well, she got mad. She went and yelled at Richard. All of the third grade heard her yelling at the child. She told the child he had killed the bird. Well, Richard cried and was not all right all day. I thought this was uncalled for. Children this age are very sensitive and proud. These children didn't realize that they had done a thing wrong. They were proud of the birds and wanted to care for them. I realize that the children need to learn a lesson from this, but a calm talk was a gracious plenty. These children were really scared and probably will be fearful of

teachers for awhile. This is where teachers get looked on badly by students and parents. I'm really disappointed in Mrs. M.

This passage also shows that Kate was not willing to accept as reasonable all the actions and beliefs of the other teachers in the school (just as she did not accept all of my ideas). She struggled to develop her own ideas about what teaching should be and how teachers should interact with children.

In fact, Kate and her cooperating teacher, for whom she had a great deal of respect, openly confronted the difference between being a student teacher and being a "real" teacher. As the following passage from Kate's journal shows, she was not willing to accept the conclusion of her cooperating teacher:

Today, Mrs. C and I had an enlightening conversation at the end of the school day. We talked about how teachers are now taught to be teachers. Mrs. C says that she feels very inefficient and un-creative when she has a student teacher from the University. Mrs. C said that she is a very conservative and traditional teacher. She believes that teachers don't have the time to be real creative and experimental every day. She said that she believes the way "we" (student teachers) teach is very effective and interesting to the students. But she said in order for a real teacher to cover all the required materials, she needs to teach in a straight forward way. She also said that student teachers have the time and energy required to develop and plan interesting activities and lesson plans.

I don't know how I feel about this conversation. On one hand I can see Mrs. C's viewpoint. But on the other hand, this attitude totally contradicts everything that my teaching career is based upon. I feel that teaching should be an enjoyable and interesting experience for students in order to stimulate their interest in education and learning. I like to teach in a creative way, but sometimes I feel that teaching directly from the book is necessary. But even when I teach directly from the book, I add learning activities and games. I will continue to teach this way in the future; that is, until I learn a better or more effective way (a better or more effective way for me to teach). I'll probably think about this conversation all quarter, especially when I have a lesson that flops.

The respect Kate had for her cooperating teacher shows because she took Mrs. C's comments seriously, but Kate was not ready to give up her ideals. It is possible, of course, that Kate will come to accept Mrs. C's view of teaching. However, because Kate was able to see what it means to be a "real" teacher as an issue, because she was so willing to discuss it, and because she was so honest in her response, I am not willing to dismiss her response as simply representing the first stage of some hopeless and inevitable process through which student teachers are slowly transformed by the realities of schooling. The oppressive conditions of teaching that I referred to earlier did and will affect Kate's view of teaching, but she provides an example of a student teacher resisting those conditions. Upon this resistance, I base my hope for the future of teaching; using this resistance, I define my task as a supervisor.

Paradoxically, Kate's resistance was encouraged by the same cooperating teacher who had come to accept and espouse a limited view of teaching. As the following passage from Kate's journal shows, Mrs. C encouraged Kate's

reflectiveness and resistance by continuing to speak out about issues such as the abuses associated with standardized testing:

An important aspect of my experience today was my conversation with Mrs. C at the end of the school day (3:30-4:45). We planned some of my teaching requirements for the quarter. We also had a conversation about the CRT's, CAT's, and I.Q. tests that are administered to children near the end of the academic school year. Mrs. C and I discussed the point that some of the material on the standardized tests hasn't been taught during the school year. We also talked about this matter being unfair and upsetting to the children because they have never been exposed to this new material. Mrs. C and I also discussed the format of these tests and their relationship to the students' previous testing. We talked about the children not having experiences with name grids and fill in the circle type tests. We both said it is hard to familiarize the students with these testing methods without taking away a large percentage of the class time. We also talked about how hard it is to fit these tests in the school day without taking away a lot of class instruction time. (For instance, mid-term grades are due in April. The first period class will have missed instruction for 2½ weeks by Mrs. C before all the testing is completed. So far, Mrs. T doesn't have a single grade for this class as of yet. The issue there is how to determine grades without scores.)

By having a cooperating teacher who spoke with her about such issues, Kate was able to reflect on the helplessness and anger that result from teachers being forced to adjust their classrooms to the control of others.

The answer to the question of what should be done about the teaching profession is not simply to declare that, henceforth, teachers will be given full control of their classrooms. Institutions of teacher education, for instance, need to think again about the difference between training technicians and educating professionals. Local and state education agencies also need to reconstruct their roles and their expectations for students and teachers. In short, changes inside the classroom require concomitant changes outside the classroom. Our vision, however, should be one of teachers in control of their work; student teachers like Kate help me maintain my faith in teachers and my belief in such a vision.