

An Approach to Teaching

The following statement, by program co-chair [John M. Dolan](#), was written on the occasion of his induction into the University of Minnesota's Academy of Distinguished Teachers, in June 1999.

My philosophy of education can be expressed in a single sentence: "You are teaching a fish to swim." I am suspicious of instructors who, thinking they understand what is going on when real intellectual growth takes place, wax eloquent about their pedagogical "methodologies." Examined closely, episodes described as "inspired teaching" are occasions in which abilities and powers already present in the "student" are somehow stimulated and stirred into more vivid realization and new growth. Neither the "teacher" nor the "student" is wholly in charge of the direction or character of that new life and growth.

Universities now find among their incoming students a number who are disillusioned, cynical, and only marginally literate (to continue the opening metaphor: fish which haven't been near water for some time), but these forlorn students possess human powers (however embryonic) indistinguishable in kind from those which created the treasures of thought and art of the world's civilizations. The powers lying dormant in these students await occasions that stir them into life. A "teacher" speaking with enthusiasm, knowledge, and love about some important subject can sometimes create such occasions. But an instructor with proper reverence for the mysteries of learning and intellectual growth will be reluctant to accept the label "teacher" and will refuse to take credit for the growth the student ultimately achieves. A plant springs and prevails through its own inner force. The role of external stimuli matters less than the plant's inner constitution. In the meantime, I am conscious that all writing, and especially all philosophical writing, is rewriting and, accordingly, attempt to give my students plenty of opportunity to rewrite the papers they are assigned. When teaching logic at the undergraduate level, I arrange many hours of weekly "workshops" (most led by undergraduates who have demonstrated particular love of the subject) which give the students an opportunity to work together on problems and explore the subject in the presence of someone already at home in it.

Further, in a country in which roughly five percent of all illness is iatrogenic (caused by physicians), I try to bear in mind that doctors are not the only professionals who may inflict damage as they carry out their work. Teachers, like doctors, can do considerable harm if they are careless. Commonplace examples of pedagogic injury at the university level are provided by courses in which students are asked to read twenty serious books in the space of a short term (and thereby led into mandatory thoughtlessness) or courses in which they are told that the line between truth and falsehood is an arbitrary social construction and that traditional discriminations among works of literature or art are merely reflections of group interests and political power. At the level of elementary education, equally harrowing examples abound. Teachers could take a hint from doctors and adopt the rule: "Primum non nocere" (first do no harm). The measurement of stupidity is no doubt as problematic as the measurement of intelligence; nonetheless, the amount of stupidity in this country caused by schools and teachers probably exceeds five percent of the total. We might term such stupidity "magistrogenic stupidity." The circumstance that our language doesn't label the phenomenon is evidence that the risk of producing magistrogenic stupidity may be generally neglected. Finally, given that so little is known about learning and the growth of knowledge, any of us who accept the role of instructor might profit from Aristotle's remark that "Those who work with pleasure always work with more discernment and greater accuracy."