

# QUESTIONS I WOULD ASK MYSELF IF I WERE A TEACHER

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Revision of a talk given to a Conference on the Gifted and the Talented, Squaw Valley, California, July, 1973. Reprinted from EDUCATION Vol 95 #2

I have been asked to talk about humanizing education for gifted children and since most of you in this audience are dealing with programs for the gifted and talented I shall try to point my remarks in that direction. However, I believe that what I have to say applies to education for children with various labels because all children have tremendous potentialities, far more than are released. Those of you, however, who are privileged to work with youngsters who seem to have the greatest potentialities are indeed fortunate. You have a rare opportunity.

In many ways I am ill fitted for the task I have been given. I have never taught an elementary or high school class and only a relatively small number of undergraduate college students. I simply do not know at first hand the kind of situations you face every day in your classrooms.

So I have wondered whether I have anything to contribute.

It has seemed to me that perhaps I could simply raise with you the questions that I would ask myself if I were given responsibility for the learnings of a group of children, gifted or otherwise. Suppose I was to be thought of as their teacher. I have tried to think about the questions I would ask myself, the things I would try to learn, the things I might try to do. How would I meet the challenge posed by such a group?

What Is It Like?

I think the first question I would raise is: What is it like to be a child who is learning something significant? I believe the most meaningful answer I can give is to speak from my own experience.

I was a very good boy in elementary and high school. I got good grades. Frequently I annoyed my teachers by being clever enough to get around the rules they had set up, but I was not openly defiant. I was a very solitary boy with few friends, isolated from others by a very strictly religious home. My family moved from a suburban setting to a large farm with acres of woodland when I was 13. At that time the Gene Stratton-Porter books were popular, which involved a wilderness setting and made much of the great night-flying moths.

Shortly after we moved to the farm I found a pair of luna moths—great pale green wings with purple trimmings—on the trunk of an oak tree. I can still see the spread of shimmering green with its iridescent lavender spots, bright against the shaggy black bark. I was enthralled. I captured them, kept them, and the female laid hundreds of eggs. I got a book on moths. I fed the baby caterpillars. Though I had many failures with this first brood I captured other moths and gradually learned to keep and sustain the caterpillars through their whole series of life changes; the frequent molting of their skins, the final spinning of their cocoons, the long wait until the next spring when the moths emerged. To see a moth come out of its cocoon with wings no bigger than a thumbnail and within an hour or two to develop a five to seven inch wingspread was fantastic. But most of the time it was hard work; finding fresh leaves every day, selected from the right varieties of trees, emptying the boxes, sprinkling the cocoons during the winter to keep them from drying out. It was, in short, a

large project. But by age 15 or 16 I was an authority on such moths. I knew probably twenty or more different varieties, their habits, their food, and those moths which ate no food during their lifespan. I could identify the larvae by species. I could spot the big three to four inch caterpillars easily. I never took a long walk without finding at least one caterpillar or cocoon.

But it interests me as I look back on it that to the best of my recollection I never told any teacher and only a very few fellow students of this interest of mine. This consuming project wasn't in any way a part of my education. Education was what went on in school. A teacher wouldn't be interested. Besides I would have so much to explain to her or him when after all they were supposed to teach me. I had one or two good teachers whom I liked during this period, but this was a personal project, not the thing you share with a teacher. So here was an enterprise at least two years in length, scholarly, well researched, requiring painstaking work and much self discipline, wide knowledge and practical skills. But to my mind it was, of course, not a part of my education. So that is what real learning was like for one boy.

I am sure that significant learning is often very different—for girls, for the ghetto child, for the physically handicapped child. But keeping this aspect of my own childhood learning in mind, I would try very hard to find out what it is like to be a child who is learning. I would try to get inside the child's world to see what had significance for him. I would try to make school at least a friendly home for such meaningful learning wherever it might be occurring in the child's life.

### Can I Risk Myself in Relationship?

A second cluster of questions I would ask myself would run along these lines: Do I dare to let myself deal with this boy or girl as a person, as someone I respect? Do I dare reveal myself to him and let him reveal himself to me? Do I dare to recognize that he/she may know more than I do in certain areas—or may in general be more gifted than I?

Answering these questions involves two aspects. One is the question of risk. Do I dare to take the risk of giving affirmative answers to the queries I have raised? The second aspect is the question of how this kind of a relationship can come about between the student and myself. I believe that the answer may lie in some type of intensive group experience, a so-called communications group, human relations group, encounter group, or whatever. In this kind of a personal group it is easier to take the risk because it provides the sort of psychological climate in which relationships build. An experience in such a group would make almost impossible the following statement by a gifted black student. "My Utopia is to get to the point where I can retreat into my dream world, because I have learned that I can't find happiness with human beings."

I think of a very moving group (recorded on film - *Because That's My Way*) in which a teacher, a narcotics agent and a convicted drug addict were participants. At the conclusion of this group Russ, a high school student, said with wonderment in his voice, "I've found that a teacher, a cop, and a drug addict are all human beings. I wouldn't have believed it!" He had never found such relationships with teachers in school.

We have found much the same thing in our conferences on humanizing medical education. Here one of the outstanding learnings is that of the physicians-in-training—discovering that their department chairmen, medical school deans, and faculty members are human beings, persons like themselves. They regard this as incredible. We had the same experience in dealing with the

Immaculate Heart school system, both the high school and college levels, where students and teachers were able to relate as persons, not as roles. it was a totally new experience on both sides.

Although I have seen the highly positive results of an open and personal relationship between learner and facilitator, this does not mean that it would be easy for me to achieve it in every class or with every student. I know from experience that to show myself as I am—imperfect and at times admittedly defensive—seems like a great personal risk. And yet I know that if I could answer this second cluster of questions in the affirmative—if the relationship between myself and my students was truly a relationship between persons, much would be gained. If I was willing to admit that some students surpass me in knowledge, some in insight, some in perceptiveness in human relationships, then I could step off the pedestal of the “teacher” and become a facilitative learner among learners.

### Discovering Interests

Another question I am sure I would ask myself would be, “What are the interests, goals, aims, purposes, passions of these students?” I would want to ask the question not only collectively but individually. What are the things that excite him or her and how can I find these out?

I may be over-confident, but I think the answer to this question is an easy one. If I genuinely wish to discover a student’s interest I can do so. It might be through direct questions. It might be through allowing free discussion. It might be by creating a climate in which it is natural for interests to emerge. Although young people have been greatly deadened by their school experience, they do come to life in a healthy psychological atmosphere and are more than willing to share their desires.

It impresses me as I think back that I can recall no teacher who ever asked me what my interests were. That seems an amazing statement, but I believe it is a true one. Had a teacher asked, I would have told him about wildflowers and woodland animals and even about the night-flying moths. I might even have told him about the poetry I was trying to write or my interest in religion, but no one asked.

Although nearly sixty years have gone by, I remember one question a teacher pencilled in the margin of a freshman theme. I had written, I believe, about something I ‘had done with my dog, and alongside the description of some action I had taken the teacher wrote, “Why, Carl?” I have always remembered this marginal note but it is only in recent years that I realize the reason for the memory. It stands out because here was a teacher who seemed to have a real personal interest in knowing why I, Carl, had done something. I have forgotten all the other wise comments written on my themes but this one I remember. To me it shows how rarely it comes across to a student that a teacher really wants to know some of the motives and interests which make him tick. So if I were a teacher I would like very much to make it possible for students to tell me just these things.

### The Inquiring Mind

A fourth question I would ask myself is “How can I preserve and unleash curiosity?” There is evidence to show that as children go through our public school system they become less inquiring, less curious. It is one of the worst indictments I know. The provost of the California Institute of Technology has told me that if he could have only one criterion for selecting Cal Tech students it would be the degree to which they show curiosity. Yet it seems that we do everything possible to kill, in our students, this inquisitiveness, this wide ranging, searching wonder about the world and its inhabitants.

It has been pointed out that if you transplant a five-year-old boy into a foreign country where he is surrounded by peers who speak a language different from his own, it will be only a short time before he is conversing readily, speaking with the proper native accent, and within months quite at home in the new language. Yet if we try to teach a foreign language to a five-year-old the progress is incredibly slow. The curiosity, the desire to find out, is now missing.

A professor whom I know in a California university is finding his way of preserving the zest of inquiry. He writes me, "I want to tell you about some of the outcomes your Freedom to Learn has had for me and my students..." He tells how he decided to adapt each of his psychology courses to make them freer. He continues, "I was careful to explain to the students the assumptions underlying the approach we were going to try. I further asked them to consider seriously whether or not they wanted to take part in such an 'experiment.' (My courses are elective, so no one is required to take them.) No one decided to drop out. We—the class and I—created the course as we went along. (There were sixty in the class.) It was the most exciting classroom experience I have ever had, Carl! And, as it turned out, the students were equally excited. They turned in some of the best work (papers, reports of research, class oral projects, etc.) that I have ever seen from undergraduates. Their excitement was contagious. I found out later, from several different sources, that students in this course were constantly being asked by roommates, by peers in the cafeteria, etc., 'What did you do in class today?' 'How is the course going?' I had a constant stream of students requesting to visit the class.

"Their own evaluations of the course at the end (I have saved these) were consistently positive: 'I have never learned so much in any course I have ever taken.' 'This is the first time anyone ever asked me what I wanted to learn, 'and it was exciting to discover I do want to learn.'

"Perhaps the most meaningful evaluations for me came from those students who said that they had not learned as much as they could have, but that this was their own fault: they took the responsibility for it. There is so much more to tell, Carl, but I don't want to belabor the point. What I did want is that you know how enthusiastically these students responded to the opportunity to learn—it ways that were important for them. And 'how freeing it was for me as a fellow-learner.'" (Personal correspondence from Professor Leo Rock.)

Resources?

Another question I would be asking myself is, "How can I imaginatively provide resources for learning—resources that are both physically and psychologically available?"

I believe that a good facilitator of learning should spend up to 90% of his preparation time in making resources available to the young people with whom he or she works. To a large extent with all children, but outstandingly with bright children, it is not necessary to teach them but they do need resources to feed the interests. It takes a great deal of imagination, thought, and work to provide such opportunities.

My son is a physician. Why? Because in a forward looking school, in the junior year of high school, each student was given a number of weeks and considerable help in trying to arrange a two-week apprenticeship. My son was able to obtain the consent of a physician who found himself challenged by the naive but often fundamental questions of a high school boy. He took Dave on hospital rounds and home visits, into the delivery room and the operating room. Dave was immersed

in the practice of medicine. It enlarged his very tentative interest into a consuming one. Someone had been creative in thinking about resources for his learning. I wish I could be that ingenious.

## Creativity

If I were a teacher I hope that I would be asking myself questions like this: “Do I have the courage and the humility to nurture creative ideas in my students? Do I have the tolerance and humanity to accept the annoying, occasionally defiant, occasionally odd-ball qualities of some of those who have creative ideas? Can I make a place for the creative person?”

I believe that in every teacher education program there should be a course on “The Care and Feeding of Infant Ideas.” Creative thoughts and actions are just like infants—unprepossessing, weak, easily knocked down. A new idea is always very inadequate compared to an established idea. Children are full of such wild, unusual thoughts and perceptions, but a great many of them are trampled in the routine of school life.

Then, too, as the work of Getzels and Jackson showed, there is a difference between those students who are bright and those who are both bright and creative. The latter tended to be more angular in their personalities, less predictable, more troublesome. Can I permit such students to be—to live and find nourishment in my classroom? Certainly education—whether elementary, college or professional training—does not have a good record in this respect. So Thomas Edison is regarded as dull and stupid. Aviation only came about because two bicycle mechanics were so ignorant of expert knowledge that they tried out a wild and foolish idea of making a heavier-than-air machine fly. The educated professionals would not waste their time on such nonsense.

I would hope that perhaps in my classroom I could create an atmosphere of a kind often greatly feared by educators, of mutual respect and mutual freedom of expression. That, I think, might permit the creative individual to write poetry, paint pictures, produce inventions, try out new ventures, without fear of being squashed. I would like to be able to do that.

## Room for the Soma?

Perhaps a final question would be, “Can I help the student develop his feeling life as well as his cognitive life? Can I help him to become what Thomas Hanna calls a soma—body and mind, feelings and intellect?” I think we are well aware of the fact that one of the tragedies of present-day education is that only cognitive learning is regarded as important.

I see David Halberstam’s book, *The Best and the Brightest*, as the epitome of that tragedy. The men who surrounded Kennedy and Johnson were all gifted, talented men. As Halberstam says, “If those years had any central theme, if there was anything that bound these men, it was the belief that sheer intelligence and rationality could answer and solve anything.” Certainly they learned that viewpoint in school. So this complete reliance on the cognitive and the intellectual caused this group of brilliant men to lead us little by little into an incredible quagmire of war. The computers omitted from their calculations the feelings, the emotional commitment, of little men in black pajamas with little equipment and no air force, who were fighting for something they believed in. This omission proved fatal. That factor was not put into the computers because McNamara and the others had no place in their computations for the feeling life, the emotional life of individuals. I would hope very much that the learning that took place in my classroom might be a learning by the whole person—something difficult to achieve but highly rewarding in its end product.

## Concluding Summary

Let me conclude by stating these questions in somewhat different form—the questions I would ask if I were a teacher or a counselor or an administrator; the questions I would ask myself if I had the responsibility for facilitating the learning of young people.

1. Can I let myself inside the inner world of a growing, learning, person? Can I, without being judgmental, come to see and appreciate this world?
2. Can I let myself be a real person with these young people and take the risk of building an open, expressive, mutual relationship in which we both can learn? Do I dare to be myself in an intensive group relationship with these youth?
3. Can I discover the interests of each individual and permit him or her to follow those interests wherever they may lead?
4. Can I help young persons preserve one of their most precious possessions— their wide-eyed, persistent, driving curiosity about themselves and the world around them?
5. Can I be creative in putting them in touch with people, experiences, books— resources of all kinds—which stimulate their curiosity and feed their interests?
6. Can I accept and nurture the strange and imperfect thoughts and wild impulses and expressions which are the forerunners of creative learning and activity? Can I accept the sometimes different and unusual personalities which may produce these creative thoughts?
7. Can I help young learners to be all of one piece—integrated—with feelings pervading their ideas and ideas pervading their feelings, and their expression being that of a whole person?

If, by some miracle, I could answer yes to most of these questions, then I believe I would be a facilitator of true learning, helping to bring out the vast potential of young people.