The Teacher's Role in Liberal Education

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives/vol1/iss2/5
Man is a very poor sort of animal; our posture is awkward, our digestion weak, and our instincts unreliable. Since we have been so poorly gifted by nature we must rely upon the great elaboration of culture. Men must be taught almost everything; to walk, to talk, to make love. Humanity itself is a cultural product: an untaught man is not a man at all. Therefore, education is not just one among other problems of the human sphere; rather the problem of human life is itself the problem of education. When we hear someone say that this or that social problem can be solved by education we know that the writer has not been able to find a solution; he is saying that if people were better the problem would not exist. Education is the process by which people become better than they are.

If we are to talk of education, therefore, we must make some distinctions, and a distinction can only be made according to a principle. Americans are practical people and we usually start our inquiry on practical principles. We ask: what does this or that bit of education enable man to do? And we find ourselves dividing general education—which teaches the skills everyone must have—from specialized education—which teaches particular skills and enables men to find various slots within the division of labor.

Thus we may say that everyone should be able to read, write, and calculate; we might go further and say that everyone should be able to read critically, write elegantly, and calculate with some comprehension of the principles of mathematical thought. These skills are useful in any line of work, or at least in any middle-class activity; therefore at this stage in his education the student does not have to
ask what he will do with his learning. Later the demands of the market and this or that private sense of vocation will draw different men into different careers—one becomes a carpenter, another a philosopher. Here their educations diverge and they learn the skills of their private mysteries.

These practical principles, however, will never bring us to the question of liberal education. They are essentially servile; they see education as a response to the needs of use. Every time we are told that this or that education reform is desirable because America needs engineers—or, for that matter, because America needs poets—the idea of liberal education is in danger. Liberal Education does not concern itself with the process by which people come to be able to do what is required of them; liberal education is the process by which people come to be excellent. Servile education makes a man useful to other people; liberal education makes him satisfactory to himself.

Human excellence is various, and so, therefore, is liberal education. I make a rough division into three types.

In the first place there is education for character—the process by which men become courageous, self-controlled, truthful, responsive, responsible, and so on. The family has always been the chief educator in this line, supported by various quasi-families—schools, churches, and so on. The primary mode of learning is through imitation; morals, as we all know, are best taught by example. Some loved and esteemed figure—preferably a parent—becomes the model. Ethical education is therefore by nature conservative; through imitation the virtues—and for that matter the vices—of one generation are, more or less, recreated in the next.

Secondly there is education for action—or, as we now call it, socialization. The excellence of a man does not lie simply in acting well, but also in acting freely, taking part in the human world through competition and cooperation. The classical prototype of free activity is political deliberation, which means not only the solution of problems but also the creation of values through the process of consensus and dissent, through debate. Such free activity, however, is not limited to the life of the state; it takes place wherever men are joined on a basis of quality in a structured group.

Imagine, for instance, a small theatrical society or dining club. Such a group will have to meet practical problems: pay its bills, and so on, and its members must treat one another reasonably fairly; such groups, therefore, require the practical and ethical virtues. But most of the activity of the group does not fall within the category of the ethically virtuous or vicious. The members must decide what plays to put on, what wines to purchase, how to distribute responsibilities among themselves; most of the answers to such questions are equally
without the taint of vice. Yet without being moral questions these are the most urgent questions before the group, for it is in debating these questions that it discovers what sort of group it is, whether the theater prefers to instruct its audience or to amuse it, whether the dining club looks on conversation as an adornment to meals or meals as an adornment to conversation. A man who cannot take effective part in such controversy is not truly a free man; therefore the capacity for action in the community is one of the aims of liberal education.

The primary educator here is the peer-group, and the mode of learning is participation. Our children are learning this excellence from the time they sit down on the floor of the nursery school to struggle for toys with the other three-year olds. The parents' role—or the administrators'—can only be to create the setting for the group; the group must set its own rules if it is to create its own values; and the group must consist, formally, of equals.

The family and the peer-group are natural enemies; in the same way education for character and education for action are across-the-grain to one another. The family is hierarchical and its teachings conservative; the peer-group is equalitarian and its teachings are radical. The values of the group, being group created, are constantly in process of recreation, always as it were, contemporary to the group at that moment. Therefore, in the peer-group we feel liberated, "with it"—in the family, often stifled. On the other hand the peer-group, because it is essentially competitive, cannot love anyone. If the family tends to seem old-hat, the peer-group is swept by idle fashions; if we are to take its enthusiasms seriously we must forget how different they were a few months ago and how different they will be again in a few months more. In adolescence we encounter most vividly this conflict of the two standards, we most feel ourselves torn, but the conflict remains a permanent part of our experience, seen, perhaps, in the conflicting urgencies of the traditional and the contemporary, in the arts; or in politics in the need for authority as against the desirability of wide participation in the decision-making process.

These, then, are two types of liberal education; I promised a third. This third I associate with the university. The university was the great social invention of the classical period and it has ever since recreated itself by a return to its classical sources; in this sense it is extremely conservative. Yet the tradition that it exists to conserve is a radical tradition—secular, skeptical, iconoclastic. The university thinks of itself as a community of scholars, yet it is organized into an elaborate hierarchy. The university distrusts authority, distrusts that which claims to be so simply because it has always claimed to be so; at the same time the university distrusts the fashionable, is uneasy about the contemporary. These paradoxes could be multiplied. They have something to do, I think, with the fact that liberal education in
a university does not mean education for character nor education for action; it is not a place where men become decent human beings nor a place where they become the leaders the nation requires. Some third thing goes on among us; I should like to consider what. I approach this question indirectly—extremely indirectly—by asking: what is the role of the teacher in a university education?

One ancient notion is still with us: the notion of the teacher as a vehicle of learning, a knower to whom the ignorant appeal. In its most extreme form the teacher may actually be the sole repository of the text, as in the Indian Vedic schools, where the scholars transmitted the Vedas entirely by memory from generation to generation. Or if the text is written the teacher may possess the commentary, as in the European tradition of classical scholarship, in which much of the lore of syntactical minutiae and textual variants has been transmitted orally from scholar to scholar. Even when the text is written, the teacher may be a human index, able to find in a hundred volumes what, for example, the Talmud says on this or that point.

The situation is much the same when the teacher is the vehicle, not of fact or theory, but of practical skill. If we go to him for instruction on how to do this or that he is still a vehicle of knowing, a resource to whom we appeal. By this notion the special virtue of the teacher is the ability to respond to question; he is the man who has the answers.

This notion of the teacher is, I think, on the way out; he can be replaced by a sophisticated information-retrieval system. Soon we should be able to walk into our libraries and ask the machine: what happened at X; who has written on topic Y; how do we accomplish purpose Z? The machine will have all the answers; its print-outs will be immediate, accurate, and as good as the questions we put into it.

A second notion is of the teacher as organizer of information, the man who breaks down the indigestible lumps of knowledge so that they can be assimilated bit by bit. Here the teaching machine has a great future; it is far more patient than the human drill-master, far less likely to be distracted by an unattractive personality or a pretty face. Insofar as education can be reduced to an ordered method of comprehension and practice it can be effectively mechanized.

A third notion is of the teacher as performer, the man who makes knowledge palatable, even seductive, by the charm of his manner and the power of his rhetoric. Here again we await only the perfection of the media. When the television screen is able to give the student the sense that he is in the actual presence of the teacher, when it has been combined with the teaching machine in such a way as to demand the attention and response of the student, we will be able to immortalize the great performers of the classroom and accumulate their charisma as a possession for all time, available for immediate recall.
There is nothing like machinery to clarify a social question. Just as labor-saving devices have forced us to reflect upon the proper relation of work and leisure, so the rise of technology in the classroom forces us to reflect on the human use of the teacher. We do not face, I think, much technological unemployment in this generation; the machinery is too clumsy and too expensive. But it is worth asking: what can a man do that a machine, even in principle, cannot?

The one thing a machine cannot be is a person; that is by definition. Therefore we cannot care about machinery as we care about persons. Nor can a machine care about us. To use a modish form of language: the relation between myself and a machine must always be I-it; never I-thou.

These days, perhaps because we feel ourselves the victims of our machines, we are increasingly concerned for the vitality of personal relations. This concern extends to teaching. In an earlier age the virtue of the teacher lay in knowing, in his command of the subject-matter. Today we increasingly value the teacher for caring, for his commitment to the good of the student. This notion of the teacher's characteristic excellence began in the progressive elementary schools at the turn of the century; it has gradually seeped up to the colleges. The famous undergraduate teachers are those who cherish, even love, their students.

All of us can see the value of this notion of teaching; if a teacher does not care about his student he has no good reason for teaching him. If the student does not care about the teacher he is unlikely to learn well. Each of us, I suppose, can remember one or two teachers we cared about; these teachers were and are for us models of aspiration. In our relations with them we find that we wanted not merely to know what they knew or to be able to do what they could; we wanted also to become what they were. And this aspiration to become like the persons we care about is the most important motive for learning; so it is often said that only by establishing a personal relation with the student can the teacher motivate the student to learn.

At the same time, most of us are a little bit nervous about this stress on the personal relation between student and teacher. We are afraid that teaching will suffer if the relation becomes quasi-erotic or quasi-parental. We do not like teachers who play the Messiah and gather to themselves disciples; we distrust the tendency (in all of us) to flatter the students and so secure their love and esteem. The relation between student and teacher, we think, should not consume their energies; rather it should liberate energy to the pursuit of learning.

If the relation between student and teacher is erotic it is a kind of triangle. Student and teacher are related to one another via their relation to some third thing, the common object of their study. The teacher must care about the student, but he must also care about
the subject-matter, and if he is to care for the student properly he
must care for the subject-matter even more. Of the student the same
can be said. The subject-matter, being part of the world as it is, has
the opacity and recalcitrance of the world. It presents itself to both
student and teacher as problematic. And this recalcitrance in the
subject matter gives meaning to the relation between student and
teacher. They do not rejoice in one another's company, like lovers;
rather they submit to the discipline of a common inquiry, as jointly
they attempt to comprehend and to communicate the comprehension
of the partially incomprehensible.

Teaching, therefore, is a complex business; we have to look
several ways at once. Under the strain of this complexity we have
a tendency to simplify, to reduce the triangle to one of its sides. Either
we reduce it to the relation between teacher and pupil, and look for
good-will and equity, or we reduce it to the relation between teacher
and subject-matter, and say that as long as the teacher knows his
stuff he's all right. Or else we reduce it to the relation between
student and subject-matter and despair of ourselves as teachers; we
find ourselves saying that some will learn and some won't, and there's
very little we can do about it. But complex situations are not improved
by ignoring their complexity. Here I want to say something about
one of the most respected styles for approaching the complex teaching
situation: the Socratic.

Socratic teaching is, I think, more talked about than understood;
sometimes I have the impression that people who use the term have
never opened a Platonic dialogue. There is, for example, a widespread
notion that because Socrates asks questions he teaches in a permissive
style, that he explores the student's opinions and interests without
imposing his own views. Nothing, of course, could be farther from
the truth. Socrates' questions are all loaded questions and a Socratic
interrogation follows the first rule of forensic cross-examination: never
ask a question to which you do not know the answer. Socratic
teaching is coercive and painful, like being stung, as Meno says, by
a sting-ray.

Secondly, because Socrates talks to one person at a time, there
is a widespread impression that Socratic teaching is shaped by a
concern for the student taught. There is more truth in this idea, but
it is not a simple truth. Certainly Socrates takes no responsibility for
his students; it is Socrates who says, in the Apology:

I have never been anyone's teacher. If someone wanted
to hear me when I was talking and minding my own business I
never begrudged it; . . . I offer myself . . . indiscriminately . . .
for questioning, or if some one wants to answer my questions
and so hear what I have to say. And if anyone of those people
became better or worse, I am not liable to be held to account for it . . .

The Socratic style is impersonal; he will talk to anyone, and he does not seem to care what results his talk has for the student; his concentration is never on the person but on the argument.

On the other hand, Socrates does not have a subject-matter; on the contrary, he professes himself ignorant. The Socratic style is ironic, marked by a refusal to explain. As a teacher Socrates seems to have little going for him; yet he remains for us the teacher par excellence.

Here I wish to examine the Socratic style in some detail, and I take for my text an early dialogue of Plato: the Lysis. This dialogue is particularly revealing of Socrates' method because here his interlocutors are children, without much sophistication and with no developed position of their own to defend. So the Lysis lacks the element of conflict which we find in most Platonic dialogues; it is something like pure teaching, the filling by Socrates of an intellectual void.

The Lysis begins quite casually: Socrates is walking in the suburbs of Athens when he falls in with some men, one of whom, Hippothales, invites Socrates to come into a recently-built wrestling-ground and join the conversation there. There is a good deal of teasing talk in the street, in the course of which it appears that Hippothales is head-over-heels in love with one of the boys who frequents the wrestling-ground, a beautiful child named Lysis. Hippothales is always praising Lysis and composing songs in his honor. Socrates finds fault with Hippothales' tactics:

A man who is skilled in matters of love, my friend, does not praise his beloved before he has captured him . . . The beautiful, when they are praised and built up, become infected with pride and vainglory . . . and the more vainglorious they are, the harder to catch . . . What sort of huntsman, do you think, would rouse his prey and make it harder to capture? . . .

If you are prepared to bring me into conversation with him I might be able to give you a demonstration of the kind of conversation which will work, rather than the talk and poetry they say you are using.

Upon entering the wrestling ground, Socrates is introduced to Lysis and his friend Menexenus, another boy of twelve or thirteen years. They talk for a moment, and Menexenus goes off. Socrates begins his demonstration:

Well now Lysis, I suppose your father and your mother love you very much?

Certainly.

So they want you to be as happy as you can be?

Oh yes.
Do you think a man is happy when he is in servitude and cannot do anything which he wants to do?
I should think not, absolutely.
Now I suppose that if your father and mother love you and want you to be happy it must absolutely follow that they make every effort to see that you are happy.
Of course.
So they allow you to do what you want, and they never restrain you or prevent you from doing what you wish?
Good lord, Socrates, in my case, they prevent me all the time.
What's that you say? They want you to be happy and then prevent you from doing what you want? Let's take an example. Suppose you want to drive one of your father's chariots and take over the reins, in a race, I mean, wouldn't he permit you; would he prevent you?
There's no question about it; he'd never let me.
Whom does he allow, then?
We have a charioteer at our house who's paid for that.
What's that? They allow one of the servants to do something they won't let you do, when it comes to horses, and pay him well?
But what else would they do?

"Do your parents love you?" "Do they let you do what you want?" "Can anyone be happy when they can't do what they want?" It is hard to think of any questions more likely to catch in the mind of an adolescent boy. Socrates begins with the student where he is, with the questions which concern him. On the other hand, the tone is playful and the concern does not go beyond the surface of the question. Socrates does not go into the empirical question and ask whether Lysis' parents really do love him; neither does he explore the moral question of the relation between happiness and liberty. He does not act as either therapist or pastoral counsellor. Instead he gives the argument a twist. After several more examples of how Lysis' parents restrict and hamper him Socrates asks:

But why is it that they hinder you so dreadfully from being happy and doing what you want, and keep you all day in servitude to someone and, in brief, doing almost nothing you wish—so that apparently, you have all this money and it's of no use to you; nor is your body, fine as it is, but someone is always shepherding you around and looking after you . . .
I'm not yet of age, Socrates.
That cannot be the explanation, son of Democritus, since here is a case where, I would guess, your father and your mother give you liberty and do not wait for you to come of age. When they want to be read to or for someone to write at their dictation you are the first person in the house they ask. Isn't that so?
Yes.
And in this case you can write whichever letter you want first and whichever second. And you have the same liberty in reading. And when you pick up the lyre, your father and mother don't hinder you from tuning and untuning any string you want, and from strumming and striking with the plectrum. Or do they hinder you?
No they don't.
Now just why would it be, Lysis for what reason do they allow you liberty here, whereas in those other cases they prevent you?
Well I suppose because I know how to do these things, but these other things I don't.
Ah, excellent, my friend.

Socrates has proposed to Lysis a problem, and has put him into a position to come up with an answer: we have liberty to do what we know how to do. Since they have agreed earlier that liberty is a necessary condition of happiness, the solution to Lysis' problem leads directly to one of the basic Socratic paradoxes: That knowledge is happiness. It seems that the dialogue is about to become serious.

Socrates, however, does not take this turn. He goes straight back to Lysis' situation:

So it turns out that your father isn't waiting for you to be of age in order to turn everything over to you, but on the day when he thinks you have more sense than he has he will turn over to you himself and his property.
I suppose so.
Well then. In your neighbor's case, does not the same principle apply . . . Don't you think he will turn his property over to you for management of property that he has, or will he look after it himself?
I guess he'll turn it over to me.
Well, and the Athenians, don't you think they'll turn their affairs over when they notice you have sense enough?
I do.
. . . What about the Great King? Will he allow his eldest son, to whom the rule of Asia belongs, to throw what he wants into the pot when he is making a stew, or if we come by and demonstrate that we know more about stew-cooking than his son?
He will allow us, obviously.
What if his son has sick eyes, will he allow him to touch his own eyes if he thinks he has no medical knowledge, or will he prevent him?
He will prevent him.
But if he thinks we have medical knowledge, even if we want to hold his eyes open and throw in ashes, he will not
prevent us because he will think we know best.

That's true.

That's the way it is, Lysis. In those matters where we have become sensible, everyone will turn them over to us, Greeks and barbarians, men and women, and we will do in those cases whatever we want . . . we will be free and rulers over others, and those things will be ours—for we will get the good of them—but in cases where we are not intelligent, no one will allow us to do what we think best in these cases, but they will prevent us insofar as they are able, not only strangers, but even our fathers and mothers and if there is anyone closer to us than this; in those cases we will be subject to others and our property will not be our own—for we will get no good of it. Do you agree with that position?

I agree.

And I . . . (says Socrates glancing toward Hippothales) . . . and I was about to say: That is the way, Hippothales, to converse with your beloved, humbling and abasing him; not in your style, glorifying him and giving him an inflated idea of himself . . .

What happens to Lysis in the course of this argument? He is presented with a real problem, encouraged to reach a sketch of a solution, and then that solution is reduced to absurdity. He has been humbled, lowered, subjected to Socrates. Socrates does this with so much elegance and charm, however, that Lysis does not become angry. On the contrary: Socrates accomplished the seduction of Lysis.

At that point Menexenus came back and sat down by Lysis . . . Lysis, very childishly and affectionately, in a voice Menexenus could not hear whispered to me:

Socrates, what you were saying to me, say that to Menexenus as well.

And I said: you will say it to him, Lysis; for you paid close attention.

Yes indeed, he said.

Try to remember the whole as best you can, so that you can say it clearly. If you forget any of it, ask me again the very first time we meet.

I will, Socrates, I'll be sure to, no question. But say something else to him, so I can hear it, until it's time to go away.

Well, that's what we'll do, I said, since you tell me to. But be ready to come to my help, if Menexenus tries to refute me. Don't you know what an arguer he is?

Oh yes indeed I certainly do. That's why I want you to converse with him.

So as to make me a laughing stock?

No, Indeed, but so that you can be hard on him.
Socrates' first argument with Lysis is based on a paradox: that people will allow us to do what we know how to do. This paradox is developed by a trick familiar to Socrates: the technical expert is taken as the paradigmatic knower, and the liberty extended to the technical expert in the exercise of his mystery is made the paradigm of liberty. Because Lysis does not recognize Socrates' jump from the special case to the general application he is led into absurdities.

The process attracts Lysis to Socrates because in the course of it Socrates exercises power over Lysis. Socrates, who claims to know nothing about anything (except love), knows how to dominate others in argument, and also knows that such dominion is attractive. Power is inherently attractive, and is, furthermore, transferable. Socrates' paradox can be learned, and used by the learner on others. So Lysis is seduced, not so much by Socrates, as by Socrates' power of argument; he sees that these arguments are valuable to him and therefore he has a motive for learning them.

So far Socrates has taught Lysis nothing but sophistry. In the next conversation—between Socrates and Menexenus—Lysis' education is carried a stage further.

This argument is impossible to translate, as it is based on the ambiguity of the Greek word *philos*. That which is the object of our affection can be called *philos*, or dear; a person who cares for some object or person can be called *philos* to it, or devoted; two persons related by a bond of mutual good-will are called *philoi*, or friends. By playing these three meanings off against one another Socrates has no difficulty in showing that no definition of *philos* is adequate to all its uses, and that any definition will lead us into absurdity when we apply it to some uses of the word. Socrates concludes to Menexenus:

> So what are we to do if the befriender is not a friend, nor are the befriended, nor are those who are both befriending and befriended? Are there any others beyond these whom we may call friends to one another?

> God only knows, Socrates; I don't know what to say next.

> Well then, Menexenus: were we seeking in quite the wrong way?

> I should think so, Socrates, said Lysis—and at the moment of speaking he blushed. I thought the remark had escaped him against his will, due to the close attention he was paying to the argument. For even while he was listening his state of mind was clear.

> So then I . . . , delighted with his philosophic temper, turned toward Lysis and took up the argument . . .

Lysis has asked Socrates to turn his sophistries on Menexenus, so that he can enjoy the spectacle of Menexenus' discomforture. But as Socrates talks Lysis becomes fascinated by the argument—not by
its effect but by its inherent self-contradiction. He has ceased to be interested in the persons and has become involved in the logos, the pattern of discourse. So great is his involvement that when he speaks and becomes aware of himself as a person, surrounded by other persons, he blushes. This blush is the mark of Lysis' conversion from sophistry to philosophy.

The second half of the Lysis is more interesting philosophically but less germane to our purpose. In it Socrates examines the meaning of friendship in terms of familiar Socratic commonplaces; same and other; the good as the useful versus the good as admirable. Without the second half the dialogue would be incomplete: the conversion to philosophy would be pointless if philosophy had no content, and the Socratic commonplaces are themselves that content. But here I am not talking about Socrates' philosophy, but about Socrates' approach to the student, and about that enough has been said.

We often find it hard to translate the Socratic style so that it means something to us in our own situation as teachers. It seems that the Socratic method may be appropriate for moral or metaphysical controversy, but that it is irrelevant to teachers of history, say, or languages, or chemistry. I believe the Socratic style can work in any kind of teaching; I will here try to translate it into terms which make sense to us where we are.

The translation is difficult because the Socratic dialogue starts, not from subject-matter but from the teacher. Lysis has not registered with Socrates for a course on friendship. They simply fall into conversation; it is up to Socrates to find something for them to talk about. Our teaching begins from subject-matter; the students come to us to learn something in particular. Nevertheless we have the same three problems: we have to begin with the students where they are, we have to offer them something which is useful to them, and thirdly we have to show them something more. And this "something more" justifies the whole enterprise.

Beginning with the student where he is does not mean that the Socratic teacher starts from the student's hang-ups. On the contrary the process of the Socratic teacher is exactly opposite to that of the psychotherapist. The psychotherapist starts from the patient's problems and shows that they make a certain kind of sense—"I can't get on with my mother and I can't study"—"Perhaps you are trying to flunk out of school because you think that's what your mother really wants." The Socratic teacher starts from the student's certainties and shows them to be problematic—"Do your parents want you to be happy?" "Of course." "Do they let you do what you want?" Socratic teaching creates problems where none were before, by showing the student that he does not know what he thinks he knows.

Take language teaching, for example. The student who under-
takes a foreign language intends to learn to translate it into English and this we can teach him—by machine, if we are well equipped. But translation is problematic, because what can be said in one language cannot exactly be said in another. And since speakers of all languages live in the same world, the impossibility of saying the same thing in two languages means that, in a sense, that thing cannot really be said in either. The Socratic teacher of languages uses the teaching of the technique of translation as an occasion for reflecting upon the impossibility of translation and so for reflection upon the problem of meaning—not as a generic question but as a problem recurring in a multitude of specific cases.

Or take the case of imaginative literature. Anyone who has read it with reasonable attention knows what happens in a given scene of Hamlet. Hamlet, for example, does something. But it is also true that in production an actor does something, and what the actor does is not what Hamlet does. And Shakespeare also did something and what he did is in fact the scene of Hamlet doing something. All these doings are going on at the same time, and the relation between them is problematic. That is part of the problematic of imitative art. So what the student thought he understood is more complicated than he thought, and what looked like a fact is the beginning of an inquiry.

Beginning with the student where he is implies a prior diagnostic: the Socratic teacher must discover what the student already thinks he understands. Since everyone understands something no special preparation is required of the student. But a great deal is required of the teacher. He does not merely follow the student's line of thought in a non-directive style; he takes hold of the student, in the Platonic metaphor, and turns him around. He involves the student in an unexpected line of inquiry. That is what the teacher is there for. Thus it is not enough for the teacher to know the subject as an encyclopedia knows the subject; the teacher must also know the problematic of the subject, and know it with enough particularity to make the subject problematic for the student. Since the particular form which the problematic will take in a particular conversation is unpredictable, since it arises only in the contact between two intellects at a particular moment, Socratic teaching cannot be carried on by machine.

By beginning with the student where he is the Socratic teacher establishes a personal relation with the student. By taking the student in an unexpected direction the Socratic teacher establishes his superiority to the student; the relation between teacher and student is a hierarchical relation. The teacher becomes a model for imitation; the student tries to learn to do what the teacher does, and so the student tries to master the problematic of the subject. Thus, the student, while he is learning something, is at the same time learning to think
about that something; he is acquiring knowledge and at the same
time developing an intellectual virtue. And the teacher is something
like a parent.

For learning to take place, however, it is not enough that there
be something to be learned; the student must also want to learn it.
Thus we find ourselves saying that it is not enough for the teacher
to instruct; he must also motivate the student. We motivate students in
various ways. We build around education a system of rewards and
punishments—grades, degrees, honors, probation, expulsion, the prom­
ise of employment and the disgrace of failure. These are more or
less effective, but they are external to the process of education itself
and—particularly these days—young people are quite capable of
avoiding our particular sanctions by denying the validity of the whole
system. If they do not wish to be employed and they don't mind
being disgraced we cannot use rewards and punishments to induce
them to become educated.

The personal relation between teacher and student, as I said, may
motivate the student; if the teacher is an attractive person the student
will want his approval, and want to be like him. The danger here
is that the student will become a disciple, that he will merely imitate
his master. Since the imitation is always a reduced version of the
original, generations of discipleship imply a steady decline in quality.

The Socratic teacher observes that the life of the mind is both
personal and social; education is something that happens to a man
and also something that goes on in a group. So the Socratic teacher
puts the students in touch with one another and shows them that their
learning is of use in the life of the group. He encourages the students
to criticize one another's work and to teach one another. Thus the
students become a peer-group, an arena for controversy and coopera­
tion. Thus the student is introduced to the community of scholars,
a community where quickness of mind and subtlety of insight means
power and status, and education, not for its rewards but in itself is
a way to the respect of our neighbors. When education becomes a
mode of action in society it is a way of being alive and its own
institution.

The Socratic teacher, therefore, tries to build a community of
discourse. A group discussion—which is moderated rather than
directed by the instructor—is such a community, sometimes intense,
always evanescent. A seminar to which students contribute formal
papers is a larger version; a whole college can, at certain moments,
become such a community. I myself have some experience of a
staff course taught both by graduate students and by senior faculty;
here the staff has developed into a community of discourse. We are
not, perhaps, as successful as we could be in putting our student in
touch with discourse outside a particular University as the law schools
do, for example, with the Law Review.

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The danger here, of course, is that discourse becomes a game. It degenerates, in Socratic language, from philosophy to sophistry. Learning which is merely a mode of relating to the peer-group is frivolous—as learning which merely seeks the approval of our elders is frivolous. The relation between inquirers, as was said, is not a personal relation; the persons are related by way of some third thing. The presence of this third thing makes inquiry serious.

But after this discussion we can no longer think of this third thing as the subject-matter. Subject-matter is present at every stage; students are always learning something, talking about something. The Socratic style does not concern itself with the object of inquiry but with the condition of the inquirer; the source of seriousness is some principle which transcends the personal stance of student and teacher in relation to the subject-matter at hand.

This third thing is the discipline of inquiry—what Socrates calls the logos. Of every inquiry there is a discipline, a propriety of discourse, a logic, grammar, and rhetoric, if I may use the familiar Chicago triad. A language, for example, is not simply a given phenomenon, lucid to any sort of question. It is a phenomenon which must be questioned in a way appropriate to it; we will go wrong, for instance, if we treat a language as a work of art, as something planned; on the other hand (since language is a human phenomenon) we will equally go wrong if we treat it as an object in nature, like a tree. Nor can we properly treat Hamlet as a political act or as a work of psychological theory. What Wayne Booth has said of art applies to all subjects of inquiry. Booth says: you can ask any questions about a work of literature, but you must ask them in the right order. This ordering of questions is the discipline of our inquiry.

The intellectual disciplines are the special responsibility of the universities. Culture through its history has constantly created new disciplines—mathematics, theology, aesthetics, psychoanalysis—and as these become established they become part of the order of disciplines which the university includes. Here these cultural forms are maintained, not as dead bodies of data, but in a living tradition of inquiry. If it were not for the universities, liberal education in the intellectual disciplines would not exist.

The personal relations between teacher and student, between student and student, give education its vitality and warmth. The disciplines are impersonal, trans-historical, and cool. The right way of speaking remains the same, whether we like it or not; logic is not subject to fashions and grammar cannot be remade by political fiat. Furthermore, the discipline is something we both know and don’t know. Since the discipline constitutes the standard of excellence for the inquiry it is not encountered in our immediate experience or inquiry. The discipline stands behind the material activity as the form to which it aspires.
The disciplines, because they are impersonal, are the source of individuality in the intellectual life. The student can go beyond his master because he finds in his master's work a rough sketch of the discipline which the master, like the student, is seeking to realize. In Socratic language the student imitates the master, not in servile imitation of the master's actual activity, but in constructive imitation of the form of that activity. When the student sees through the master to the discipline he ceases to be trapped in a position of discipleship and becomes an independent inquirer.

In the same way the discipline, because it transcends the here and now, liberates us from the constraints of the group. The members of a community of discourse do not merely seek status within that community; they also seek, through controversy and cooperation, to make the discourse of the community adequate to the discipline. When the student sees through the community to the discipline he ceases to be simply a member of the community and becomes one of its legislators. So no contribution to discourse, no scholarly work or critical essay, can be truly serious if it takes the existing tradition of inquiry for granted; every serious work attempts to remake the tradition of inquiry in the image of its own potential excellence.

So the disciplines, just because they are independent of ourselves and of our situations, enable us to discover ourselves in our situation. Just as the infant can have no conception of himself until he understands that he occupies a world composed of objects which are not himself, objects arranged in an order over which he has no control, so also the inquirer can have no sense of his own inquiry until he understands it vis-a-vis an order of inquiry not peculiar to himself or to his times. That is the special liberation which the universities, at their best, can offer; the task of the teacher is to help the student to look through the here-and-now to the enduring order latent in it. In so doing he helps the student achieve the particular form of excellence characteristic of intellectuals. Socrates spoke of this characteristic excellence as self-knowledge; he said that he sought it, not by private brooding on his passions, but by following, with his friends, the logos where it led him.