

1973

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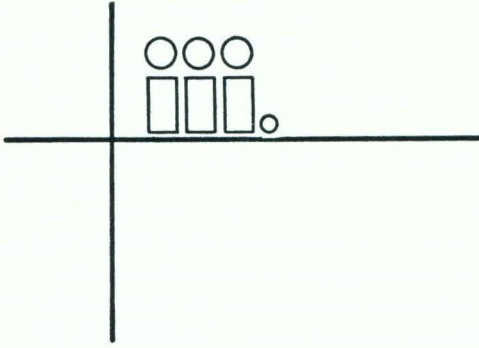
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Recommended Citation

Gross, Francis L. Jr. (1973) "Jonathan Harvey Coxgull: An Experiment in College Teaching," *Perspectives (1969-1979)*: Vol. 5 : No. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives/vol5/iss2/4>

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Jonathan Harvey Coxgull: An Experiment in College Teaching

By FRANCIS L. GROSS, JR.

I should like you to take a trip with me to an undergraduate general studies class, a course that grew from the kind of course that was, back in the fifties, required matter for all undergraduates in college. This one is an upper class elective having to do with Human Communication. Rather than make a carefully drawn comparison with other and older teaching styles, I'm just asking you to come along.

Some thirty students and I assemble in a classroom, the walls of which are composed of plastic-covered grey cinder block. The floor is blotchy asphalt tile, green blackboard in the front of the room, indestructible teacher's table of laminated wood topping with steel legs, posture-type lecture chairs for students. There is a small fortress-like gesture of a slit window in the corner, more or less impossible to open or close, depending on the vagaries of what student or professor last tried to jimmy it open or shut. In short the room has an antiseptic aura reminiscent of the inside of a battleship. It is clean but not decorative. The chief sign of human life other than my bearded and professorial presence and the varying denims of the students is a decided odor, bodily in derivation, redolent of the proverbial monkey cage. Classrooms through the ages have not been noted for their decor. The "functional" confines of Dunbar 4030, built with a backlog of centuries of experience and technology, does make one wonder if teachers and students ever talk to the architects who design the battlefields where we mutually do our thing in college. Oh yes, the room is well lighted and nearly proofed for sound with respect to other classrooms in the building. It was constructed in 1970 at the expense of the taxpayers

of the sovereign state of Michigan and is located on the campus of Western Michigan University. Be it said, this is not a slam at my school in particular. I feel it will be recognizable by most folk who have attended large schools during their college undergraduate education—from Harvard to the University of Hawaii. My concern is to bring you to my classroom; and here it is.

As the students enter, let's note that in previous classes we have been doing a study of the phenomenon of fantasy, in particular as it has been described by Dr. Harvey Cox in his small book, entitled *A Feast of Fools*. We have concerned ourselves with the function of fantasy in man's life, its somewhat dilapidated state in Western technological society, and the reasons for that moribund state. The assignment for this present session is Richard Bach's small best seller about a seagull named Jonathan. In a previous class the students had shown great enthusiasm for this small fantasy-call for man to seek perfection and love, no matter what the cost.

As the students drift in for the beginning of our two-hour session, I distribute to each a worksheet with eight short questions concerned with relating the story of Jon Seagull with Dr. Cox's theory of fantasy. There is a brief period of shock among my friends at the thought of performing such an exercise of mental gymnastics, but then, having exactly fifteen minutes to complete the exercise, they begin the painful task of examining carefully whether an abstract theory fits a very concrete example. At the end of the fifteen minutes the students are requested to form groups of four to five persons, bringing their papers with them. They are then given a sheet with the same questions, one sheet to each group. Instructions are to arrive at some sort of group consensus as to the answers. The groups are encouraged to argue, to collide in their heretofore struggled for but differing conclusions. They are told to avoid conflict reducing techniques such as vote taking and horse trading in arriving at a common series of answers. Their group paper should represent at least some consensus on the part of each member of the group for each of the questions. A half hour is given them to work it out. I travel from group to group, needling, prodding, watching for symptoms of horse trading or voting. The noise level in the room, if not horrendous, is considerable. Passions, God save the mark, as well as intellectual convictions tend to arise. At the end of the half hour, I collect the group papers, discard the initial individual endeavors, noting to the class that I will grade the papers ruthlessly, each member of each team getting the same mark. Nearly an hour has passed.

Having noticed in a previous class that a large number of the students feel that reading the exploits of the bird Jon has "changed their lives," "represents the freedom and imagination of the student culture," etc. I devise the following simple exercise.

Each student is presented with one legal sized piece of paper. From this paper each is instructed to construct the most perfect flying machine he or she is capable of. When the vehicles are completed, a vote will be taken by the class at large as to the flying machine that is best. After a very brief period, perhaps five minutes, in which I use my dictatorial image to get them started, I leave the room with instructions for them to call me when the machines are completed, and the vote has been taken.

From my position outside the classroom, ostensibly correcting papers, I again note noise that can only be termed boisterous. A teacher across the hall, who prefers to teach with his classroom door open, to avoid asphyxiation, I presume, eventually becomes incensed when the students begin testing their various craft for flight in the corridor. I remain assiduously out of sight. The noise subsides. A student quietly shuffles into my abode of privacy with the news that the vote has been taken.

About half an hour has elapsed from the giving out of the materials for the flying machine. As I enter I see proudly displayed on the teacher's table, a glider that any one of us could have made, perhaps with more dexterity, in the fifth grade. Softly I tread around the room, picking all manner of imaginative gliders from under lecture chairs, from corners of the room, and from the large, metal institutional waste can provided thoughtfully, for such occasions as these, by the custodial staff. I discover a glider that will sail in a perfect circle, demonstrated by its irate but outvoted creator. I find a wadded up ball of paper, which, when thrown, moves with greater speed than any of the other gliders. I unearth a perfectly contoured oval piece of paper that will glide farther and more gracefully than any of the others. Lastly, underneath my table, I note a huge but neatly rolled facsimile of what my generation called a reefer, referred to in this corner of the counter-culture as a "J," the perfect flying machine.

All are assembled on the table. I pose the question briefly that if they all identify with Jonathan Livingston Seagull, the gull that dared to fly faster, the bird who paid the price of being different, why did they, the students, who think of themselves as innovators and dreamers, choose of their own volition, such a shockingly conventional glider in the face of such overwhelmingly superior vehicles, manufactured by their own peers. Time is up. The two hours are gone; the students leave with another reading assignment for our next class.

I ask you now to think with me through our experience. First of all, I test at the beginning of each class, and that is surely a fascist approach to my hallowed profession. Secondly, I often use the group-test method described above, in one form or another. That surely violates the American spirit of competition. Yet I grade these group efforts, shades of Chairman Mao!

There is not a lot of lecturing in such a class. And thus I undercut the whole teaching profession, for what am I to do, if I do not lecture, imparting my wisdom, attained through years of formal and informal education, to the uneducated young people before me?

Indeed, is it not most unprofessional to have a group of college juniors and seniors spend nearly half a class making gliders? It's downright anti-intellectual.

"Well," I could say, "It's fun, anyway," but that seems an inappropriate response, because schooling is not supposed to be fun. Or I might say, "At least the students get to know each other a little." But after all the classroom is not the place for that—even if the students *did* discover in that class one of their number who is an aeronautical engineer, another who is a poet, and still a third who had read a lot about the phenomenon of conformity in our culture.

In bringing this entertainment to closure, let me note that all the techniques involved have been borrowed from people working within the business community in their attempt to teach teamwork, and hence higher production, in industry, as well as creativeness in approaches to industrial management problems. It is interesting to me that on the undergraduate college level at least, the world of the academe still is so often suspicious of classroom events similar to the one I have just described.

For those who think that the professor will have nothing to do, were he or she to embark on a classroom style which demands the use of different academic disciplines, a knowledge of how groups of people can learn from each other and not just from the teacher . . . for those who think that daily written feedback from classes for the professor does not make the professor sweat, or that the adaptation of such structured experiences as The Airplane Exercise to a particular intellectual and emotional climate is a simple matter—for all these assembled questioners I have but a simple answer. The price is blood, the professor's mainly. The reward is an occasional increase of curiosity and questioning on the part of the student. A byproduct, not the least, is a festive air in the classroom.

As a postscript I might add that my description of our classroom was not a chance prescript to this essay. It was intended as a symbol. It is a symbol of impersonality and sameness. My students study and live and eat in a decor similar to that room. There are roughly 20,000 of them at my school. They are strangers both to me and to each other on the first day of class each semester. If I am to get them to share experiences, and hence to aid each other in the learning process, I must somehow be an agent in breaking down within them the formidable barriers of the "Battleship," with its stifling sameness, impersonality, and functionality. For this reason I do what I do. Is it here appropriate to say a somewhat secular "Amen"?

